

Chapter 1 - Arrival at King's Cross

Saturday, July 1, 1995

* The usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark. Ron and Hermione struggled out past Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, carrying their trunks. Harry, however, stayed put.

"Fred – George – wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry pulled open his trunk and drew out his Triwizard winnings. "Take it," he said, and thrust the sack into George's hands.

"What?" said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

"Take it," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't want it."

"You're mental," said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

"No I'm not," said Harry. "You take it, and get inventing. It's for the joke shop."

"He is mental," Fred said in an almost awed voice.

"Listen," said Harry firmly, "if you don't take it I'm throwing it down the drain. I don't want it, and I don't need it. But I could do with a few laughs. I've got a feeling we're going to need them more than usual before long."

"Harry," George said weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, "there's got to be a thousand galleons in here."

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning, "think how many Canary Creams that is." The twins stared at him. "Just don't tell your mum where you got it...although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it..."

“Harry,” Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand. “Look,” he said flatly, “take it, or I’ll hex you. I know some good ones now. Just do me one favor, okay? Buy Ron some different dress robes and say they’re from you.” He left the compartment before they could say another word, stepping over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle who were still laying in the floor covered in curse marks.

* Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire – J.K. Rowling

Mrs. Weasley was waiting beyond the barrier with Hermione’s mother, Dr. Granger. She hugged Harry very tightly when she saw him, and whispered in his ear, “I think Dumbledore will let you come to us later in the summer.”

Harry nodded and murmured, “Thanks Mrs. Weasley.” She released him after a moment, and moved to greet her other children.

Harry sighed a little wistfully as he watched the Weasleys and the Grangers. For about the millionth time, he wondered what his life would be like if his parents had survived. Would he be an only child like Hermione? Would he have a flock of siblings like Ron? He smiled softly as he took in the sight of Mrs. Weasley surrounded by her chattering brood, and Dr. Granger giving Hermione a warm hug. Speculation was much more pleasant than the last few days had been, so Harry allowed his mind to wander. What would it feel like to look forward to the summer holidays? Would both his parents meet the Hogwarts Express? What would they do together?

After a few minutes, Molly Weasley came back over, pulling him out of the Land of What-Might-Have-Been with a bump. “Wherever is your family, Harry dear?” she asked, putting a protective hand on his shoulder.

Harry blinked, and gave himself a mental slap. Embarrassed at having been caught daydreaming, he glanced around the immediate vicinity, then shrugged helplessly. Hogwarts students and their families mixed with Muggle commuters and travelers. The area around the barrier leading to Platform 9 ¾ had become quite crowded while he’d been woolgathering. “Erm, they don’t seem to be here yet

Mrs. Weasley,” Harry admitted, studying the crowd. “I’m sure they’re just running a bit behind,” he tacked on hastily when the witch’s expression darkened and she gripped his shoulder a little tighter.

“Is everything okay, Harry?” Hermione asked, walking up with her mother.

“I think so,” Harry replied in a distracted sort of way. “I just haven’t been able to spot the Dursleys..”

“Well I can’t say I’m surprised,” Hermione remarked matter-of-factly. She indicated the crowd. “It’d be a bit of a trick to spot anyone in this.”

“Ah, but Harry isn’t just anyone,” George said moving to stand on Harry’s other side.

“That’s right,” Fred joined in dramatically, as he and Ron moved to stand beside George. “He’s...”

“The Youngest Seeker in a Century!” the three Weasley brothers chorused surrounding Harry and jostling him good naturedly.

Harry smiled, knowing they were doing their best to distract him from the unhappy events of a week ago. Harry and another Hogwarts student, Cedric Diggory, had been participants in the TriWizard Tournament. Voldemort, the dark wizard who had murdered Harry’s parents had used the tournament to trap him. Harry, had then been forced to participate in a ceremony that had returned Voldemort to his body. Harry had barely escaped with his life. Cedric hadn’t been so lucky. His team-mate had been of no use to Voldemort, and had been killed without a second thought.

Molly chuckled fondly. “All right you lot,” she said, addressing the boys. “You two,” she told Fred and George, “make yourselves useful and fetch some trolleys. And you two,” she addressed Harry and Ron, “push the trunks over to the wall. There’s no sense standing here in the way.”

Ron exchanged an amused glance with Harry as all four boys hurried to obey. Molly Weasley was a pleasant, kind-hearted woman, but

sane people did not risk being on the receiving end of her temper. Hermione and Ginny helped as well, and between the four of them they quickly and easily shoved the trunks over to the wall.

"There's loads of people here today," George complained a few minutes later when he and Fred returned with four trolleys. "We couldn't find enough for everyone, but I think we can manage with these."

Nodding his thanks, Harry gazed at the trolleys a little longingly and said, "I wish I could take one back to Surrey with me." When he saw his companions' questioning glances, he shrugged a little and elaborated, "It's nothing, really...I'm just a bit sore. Can't say I'm looking forward to hauling my trunk upstairs."

Molly was bursting to say that the trunk was almost as big as Harry was, and he had no business trying to haul it around alone, and furthermore those horrible muggles he lived with should be helping him, but she managed to hold her tongue. Instead, she focused on something she could do to make Harry's life a little easier. Giving the raven-haired boy a reassuring smile, she said, "Well, that's easily fixed dear. Everyone gather around Harry's trunk," she instructed, as she surreptitiously took her wand out of her pocket.

When she was essentially hidden from view, she tapped Harry's trunk with her wand and whispered a lightening charm. As an afterthought, she tapped Hedwig's cage while she was at it, then put her wand away. "There you are, dear," she told Harry pleasantly. "You should be able to manage your trunk without any trouble, and Hedwig's cage will fold flat for easy storage if you want to let her fly ahead. I'll remove the charms for you when I see you later in the summer."

Experimentally hefting the trunk, Harry set it on the trolley, along with Hedwig and her cage. "Wow! Thanks Mrs. Weasley," Harry said gratefully. The trunk wasn't completely feather-light, but it was much easier to lift and carry. He grinned at the red-haired witch. "You have no idea how much simpler this will make things."

"It's nothing, dear."

Little by little, the crowd thinned. The station was still bustling, but the Hogwarts people had largely dispersed. Mrs. Weasley and Dr. Granger chatted companionably, while Hermione and the Weasley siblings clustered around Harry and talked about various light subjects, including visits and trips to Diagon Alley.

Harry nodded and smiled, and tried to contribute to the conversation while watching for the Dursleys. He couldn't imagine why they still hadn't arrived, and he was starting to feel vaguely uneasy as well as stiff and tired. There was also an annoying soft edge to his vision. Impatiently, Harry removed his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. They felt fatigued, like he'd pulled an all-nighter studying.

His companions traded concerned looks. Madam Pomphrey, the Hogwarts mediwitch had healed all of the injuries Harry had sustained during the Third Task, but he wasn't quite himself yet. He was thinner and quieter than normal, and still looked a bit peaked.

"All right there, Harry?" Ron asked as he watched his friend polish his glasses on his shirt tail.

"Yeah. Just tired," Harry said, replacing his specs and giving Ron a small smile. The rubbing and cleaning seemed to have helped somewhat, he noted with relief. Harry glanced around for his family again, then realized the others had stopped talking. He raised an eyebrow when he noticed the other teens staring at him. "What?"

"Oh, nothing Harry," Hermione said quickly, knowing Harry hated it when they fussed. "It's just that you...uh...you just look different without your glasses." The others quickly nodded in agreement. It was a true statement, after all, and kinder than Well, Harry, you look a little weak and sick and we were just wondering if you were going to keel over on us... They were about to resume their light chatter when Dr. Granger came over to them.

"Hermione, I hate to do this love, but we have to go. We're supposed to meet some family in town to celebrate your return, and I have to

pick up Dad at the office. I'm afraid if we don't leave now we'll be late."

"Mum--!" Hermione started to object, but Harry nodded and said, "I appreciate you staying Dr. Granger."

"It's possible they got caught in traffic," Dr. Granger offered. "It was absolutely dreadful when I came earlier." She eyed the boy speculatively for a moment, considered her none-too-pleased daughter, then took a business card out of her purse. Scribbling on the back of it, she addressed Harry. "These are our home, business, and cell numbers. Molly says she'll look after you, but it just doesn't feel right leaving you here like this. Ring us if you need anything," she instructed, handing Harry the card. "We can come back and get you if need be, or you could take a cab out to our place."

"Thank you ma'am," Harry said with a grateful smile. He tucked the card into his shirt pocket then turned to his friend. "Bye Hermione. Hope you have fun tonight."

* "Bye, Harry," said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek.

Harry and the Weasleys waved as the Grangers walked away, then Molly Weasley turned her attention back to Harry. "We need to leave too, Harry dear," she said, then seemed to come to a decision. "I guess you'll just have to come with us."

Harry felt his heart sink as she began speaking, although he had expected as much. The Weasleys surely had better things to do than stand around Kings Cross Station with him. They and the Grangers had stayed more than an hour, after all. He had just started to thank her for staying, when his brain processed the last part of her statement.

A huge wave of relief and joy washed over him, for he desperately didn't want to return to his uncle's house. Although he was loathe to admit it, Harry had been badly shaken by the events of the Third Task. He had relied heavily on Ron and Hermione's patient, undemanding company since his release from the hospital wing five days before,

and was not looking forward to going somewhere he was so obviously unwanted. Vernon and Petunia Dursley, and their son Dudley hated Harry simply because he was a wizard, and “abnormal” in their opinion.

Molly watched fondly as Harry’s green eyes began to sparkle, then frowned as a shadow crossed his face. He looked up at her uncertainly. “Professor Dumbledore said I could put you all in danger,” he said softly, his disappointment and concern showing clearly. “I can’t—” he began but she was having none of that.

“Don’t be daft child!” she cried, her brown eyes snapping furiously. “Have you lost all sense? We can’t leave you here alone! It wouldn’t be safe—even if You-Know-Who wasn’t lurking about!” she continued, shaking a scolding finger. “What are you thinking? There’s no telling what could happen! You could be snatched out from under our very noses—subjected to who knows what!” Molly paused a moment, and leveled a glare on Harry that was usually reserved for the twins. “And just in case you’ve forgotten, it’s the adults’ job to protect the children, not the other way around! Where do you get such ideas?” she demanded flinging her arms wide in exasperation.

Harry for his part, found himself unable to do anything but stare dumbly at Mrs. Weasley as the fiery redhead expressed her displeasure with him. He wasn’t enjoying getting lectured, especially in front of Ron and the others, but this was different from Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia’s scoldings. The Dursleys constantly ranted about how they’d been saddled with him, and told him regularly how worthless he was. Mrs. Weasley’s tirade, though not exactly pleasant, was infinitely easier to take. Even as he winced at her scathing tone, Harry marveled at the warmth he felt, just because she cared.

“Well, I guess that makes it official,” George announced before his mother could continue. When the rest of the group looked questioningly at him, he grinned wickedly and said, “Just what this family needs...ANOTHER ickle brother!” The rest of the Weasleys stared at him in surprise for a few seconds before dissolving into giggles.

Harry grinned at George, honestly impressed. From what he could see, stopping Mrs. Weasley when she was on a roll was like trying to hold back an avalanche with your bare hands. Obviously George was well practiced in this art.

“Looks like you’ve lost your guest status, mate,” Ron hooted thumping Harry on the back. “Now she’ll be giving you chores, and nagging you about your marks!”

Harry blushed a little, and smiled shyly, as Ron and the twins began to speculate wildly on what would be expected of him as an “official” family member. Ginny even made a few suggestions, much to Harry’s surprise, and hers were the most creative of all.

Molly finally cut in when the expectations crossed beyond ridiculous. “That’s enough, now,” she said crisply, after Fred told Harry he would be locked in the attic with the ghoul if he dared put one toe out of line. “We need to finish loading the trolleys and go. Arthur will be worried.”

Harry watched the Weasleys pile their belongings on the remaining two trolleys feeling torn and indecisive. Normally he would jump at any excuse to spend time with his favorite wizarding family, but with Voldemort back...

As much as he wanted to go, Harry was terrified of putting his friends at risk. He could deal with his own life being in danger, but not theirs. Never theirs. Additionally, Harry had promised Albus Dumbledore, that he would wait until ‘preparations could be made’ before visiting his friends. What these preparations consisted of Harry wasn’t sure, but there was no doubt in his mind that the canny old wizard would know if he disobeyed. The boy cringed at the thought of disappointing his headmaster. He had done so only once before, at the beginning of second year. Professor Dumbledore’s grave expression and quiet ‘Please explain why you did this’ was somehow worse than the loudest yelling.

On the other hand, Harry wasn’t sure he could convince Ron’s mother to leave him behind—promise to Professor Dumbledore or no. In all honesty, he wouldn’t put it past Molly Weasley to simply Stupefy him, and drape his unconscious body over one of the laden trolleys if

he tried to argue. She had a valid point, after all. It probably wasn't very safe for him to be on his own just now, but still...

Harry raked a hand through his unruly black hair in frustration. Of all days for Uncle Vernon to be late!

"All right dears, let's go then," Mrs. Weasley said, herding the five teenagers toward the exit.

Harry nodded absently and grasped the trolley handle. He took one last look around the platform before starting after Ron...and spotted a familiar figure walking toward the spot where he usually met the Dursleys. Apparently Uncle Vernon had made it after all. Harry grinned in relief, then stopped short and snorted at the absurdity of the situation. Nothing like a little moral dilemma to take some of the sting out of returning to Privet Drive. He was actually happy to see his uncle for perhaps the first time in his life. An historic occasion.

"Harry? Are you with us dear?" Molly called, noticing he had fallen behind.

Oh. Oops. Harry trotted over to the plump witch. "My uncle just arrived, Mrs. Weasley," he said, his conflicting emotions showing clearly. "Thank you for everything. It was really good of you to stay..." Harry trailed off and looked down.

Molly's heart went out to the boy. She bit back a sigh, and forced herself to smile cheerily. "Well, he must have been held up by traffic after all."

Harry gave her a lopsided smile. "I suppose," he agreed without much enthusiasm.

Mrs. Weasley put her hand on Harry's shoulder again. "Would you like us to walk over with you?" she offered gently.

Harry quickly shook his head. "No, thanks all the same," he politely refused. "Uncle Vernon will likely be angr—uh, in a hurry to leave." Harry didn't want to subject them to the man's foul temper. Besides, Ron and the others had already witnessed him getting one public

scolding. Harry wasn't eager for them to see another. Even if Vernon didn't chastise Harry, he would almost certainly be rude to Mrs. Weasley and her family because they were "wizarding freaks."

Molly's eyes flashed dangerously. She looked like she was about to say something, then changed her mind. "Well, we'll see you very soon, then Harry dear," she said hugging him again. Tomorrow if I have anything to say about it. "Keep in touch, and let us know if you need anything."

"Bye Harry," Ginny said, turning back to her trolley. "See you later, mate," Ron gave Harry a little cuff on the shoulder before following his sister. * Fred and George stepped closer. "Bye, Harry, and thanks!" George said while Fred nodded enthusiastically. Harry winked at them and waved as the Weasleys continued on their way. He watched until they rounded a corner, then squared his shoulders and walked over to where his uncle was waiting.

The first thing Harry noticed as he approached, was Vernon Dursley was remarkably composed. This struck the boy as very odd. Vernon hated delays in general, and reacted explosively if there was the smallest wait. Since he was already running well over an hour behind, Vernon should have been tense and impatient, and not in the best of moods. Harry had actually expected him to come storming over while he said goodbye to the Weasleys. Whatever Vernon's reasons, Harry was glad that hadn't happened. Mrs. Weasley vs Uncle Vernon wasn't a spectacle he cared to witness.

Stopping a respectful distance from the man, Harry waited for Vernon to acknowledge him. Vernon, however, took a newspaper out from under his arm, and flipped it open to read, oblivious to the dark-haired boy.

This didn't tally with Harry's experience with his uncle. At best the man should be glaring hatefully at Harry for inconveniencing him in the first place. At worst he should be hissing threats and insults from between clenched teeth. The yelling would come later, after they were safely in the car or at home. Can't cause a scene in public, after all. In any case the two of them should be rushing toward the exit, not

standing around like this. Harry raised an eyebrow in confusion, and ventured a little nearer.

Vernon glanced up from his paper when Harry sidled up to him. He gave the boy a polite nod before returning to his reading. Harry, meanwhile, was almost beside himself with shock. The man was Vernon's approximate size and coloring, but he definitely wasn't Vernon. Now that he was closer, it was obvious, but from a distance he'd missed the details.

How in the world could... My glasses! My prescription must have changed! Harry thought hard. When was the last time my eyes were checked? The last screening I had in muggle school? How old was I, anyway? Eight? Ten? Feeling Harry's eyes on him, the man peered over the top of his newspaper. "Are you lost lad?" he asked kindly.

"What? Oh. N-no sir," Harry stammered, shaking himself out of his daze. "My uncle is supposed to be picking me up. You favor him at a distance," he tried to explain before he finished lamely, "Sorry to trouble you, sir." He swung the trolley around, and beat a hasty retreat.

"No harm done," the man called after him, before returning to his reading. Furious at himself for making such a stupid mistake, Harry wandered back to Platform 9¾. He thought briefly of trying to catch the Weasleys, but they were probably long gone. I hope Uncle Vernon gets here soon, Harry thought tiredly as he settled in to wait.

Chapter 2 - Return to Privet Drive

Saturday, July 1, 1995

Two hours later, Harry was still waiting.

He had counted all the bricks in a column, noted every crack in the wall, knew exactly how many public telephones, drinking fountains, and restrooms were in the immediate area, and was getting so bored that he was considering getting an “abnormal” school book out to read. He didn’t even have Hedwig for company anymore. Early on he had decided to take advantage of the charm on her cage. As much as he loved the snowy owl, her presence was attracting unwanted attention from many of the passers by.

Harry had given Hedwig some owl treats and water from the fountain, then released her with instructions to meet him at his uncle’s house. Once she was on her way, he gave her cage a cursory cleaning, squashed it flat, and stowed it in his trunk.

He had tried calling the house once, but no one had answered. Harry had taken this as a good sign, though, certain that the Dursleys were en route.

That had been an hour and a half ago.

No, this wasn’t “running late” or “stuck in traffic” any more. Uncle Vernon obviously wasn’t coming to collect him.

Harry glanced at the large clock to his left, and weighed his options. He had to do something soon. He had been approached a couple of times by well-meaning station personnel, so now he was sitting on his trunk, pressed as close to the wall as possible.

He might be the much vaunted 'Boy-Who-Lived' in the wizarding world but Harry was quite good at blending into the background when the situation demanded it, in spite of his fame and dramatic coloring. It was a defense he had learned in his muggle home...a classic case of “out of sight, out of mind.” If the Dursleys didn’t notice him, they

didn't say cruel things to him. It was one time when being thin and small for his age worked to his advantage.

The number of people traveling through the station was dwindling as time wore on. The Hogwarts crowd had long since gone. There were still some muggle travelers and commuters about, but nowhere near as many as before. Harry took Dr. Granger's business card out of his pocket and looked at it thoughtfully. The temptation to call was very strong, but even as he took note of which public phones were empty, the conversation he'd had with his headmaster just that morning replayed in his head...

"Mr. Potter, a word if you please." Professor Dumbledore had beckoned Harry over as he stood with Ron and Hermione at Hogsmeade Station.

Harry had left his belongings in the care of his friends, and approached his headmaster. "Yes sir?"

"Mr. Weasley's parents have expressed their wishes to have you as a guest over the summer..." Dumbledore began.

Harry's heart had leapt into his throat. Did this mean he could go straight to the Burrow?

"...and I see no reason why that can't be arranged later in the summer," Albus finished, effectively dashing Harry's hopes. "Preparations need to be made beforehand. You and your friends will be safer for now if you return to your aunt and uncle."

Harry had nodded dejectedly. "Okay professor."

"Harry, I must ask you to promise that you will not go to your friends until you are sent word that it is safe," Dumbledore had stated seriously, weighing Harry down with his gaze. "Contact them beforehand only in the most desperate of emergencies." His blue eyes held no twinkle of amusement now, only steely resolve.

Harry had gulped and nodded again, immediately grasping the oblique warning. "I promise, Headmaster," he had replied softly, meeting Dumbledore's gaze with determination.

"I promise..."

Harry heaved a frustrated sigh and stuffed Dr. Granger's card back in his shirt pocket.

Now to most people, being stuck at a train station with no ride in sight might qualify as an emergency. It might even qualify as a "desperate emergency." Harry, however, had slightly skewed ideas about emergencies because of all the danger he had faced in his short life.

Was his situation inconvenient? Yes. Highly annoying? Definitely. A desperate emergency? Nah, not really. He wasn't hurt, nothing was chasing him and nobody was trying to kill him. Life was good.

Besides, Harry was quite used to having to fend for himself. This wasn't the first time his family had shown appalling disregard for his well being. Before his first year at Hogwarts, the Dursleys had dropped him off at King's Cross Station without bothering to see him onto the Hogwarts Express. Harry grimaced a little. He'd had no clue what to do, and would have been in big trouble if he hadn't run into Ron and his family. In his more cynical moments, Harry wondered if his family had been somehow coerced into taking him in. Heaven knows they threatened him with an orphanage often enough.

Deciding he'd waited long enough, Harry hopped off his trunk, opened it, and made a quick survey of his emergency stash. After being caught in the open with no muggle money just before his third year at Hogwarts, and being subjected to his overweight cousin Dudley's diet last summer, Harry now prudently carried some muggle money along with his wizard gold, and enough non-perishable snacks to get him through the first few weeks of summer. If he was lucky maybe he wouldn't have to ask his friends to send him food again.

Harry considered calling the Dursleys one last time, but quickly discarded the idea. Another glance at the station clock told him it was

now well into the Dursley's regular dinner hour, and a call of any kind would not be well received.

He ran his fingers lightly over the pouch which contained his wizarding money. I could just go to the Leaky Cauldron... Harry thought with a flash of rebellion. He had stayed at the wizard pub/inn for a while the summer before his third year. He almost picked up the money pouch, then stopped and shook his head firmly. A promise is a promise, Potter, he scolded himself. Besides, Harry thought as he grabbed a snack and his muggle money, Hedwig is waiting. Cheered by the fact that at least one living creature on Privet Drive would be happy to see him, Harry quickly secured his trunk and walked purposefully to the ticket counter.

A while later, Harry found himself on a train heading south. He had missed the worst of the commuter traffic, so the train he was riding on was nearly empty and very quiet—quite different from the Hogwarts Express!

Slouching down in his seat, Harry grimaced as he imagined the “welcome” in store for him when he reached Privet Drive. He didn't reckon Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would be pleased when he showed up needing new glasses. I just hope they've gotten over the Ton-Tongue Toffee incident—ah. Harry trailed off as a realization struck him. Of course. It made sense.

Vernon wasn't doing him any favors because in all likelihood the whole family was probably still furious about Fred and George's prank last summer. Knowing Dudley was on a diet, they had planted one of their joke toffees for him to find. Dudley had eaten it, of course, and the results had been spectacular. According to Ron's father, Arthur Weasley, Dudley's tongue grew four feet before Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had let him shrink it. The blown up fireplace probably hadn't helped, either.

Smashing, Harry thought sourly. I wonder how many days I can go without getting thrown back in the cupboard.

By the time Harry arrived at the station in Little Whinging, it was getting on into the evening.

He considered taking a cab to Privet Drive, then hesitated. The ticket home had eaten up more of his emergency funds than he would have liked. He wasn't even certain he had enough for cab fare, come to think of it. Imagining the row that would occur, if he arrived at number four Privet Drive and had to ask for a few pounds, Harry opted to go it on foot instead. The station, if not convenient, was at least within manageable walking distance to his uncle's house.

Harry picked up his charmed trunk, and looked around warily. The uneasy feeling that had started at King's Cross had not abated. If anything, it had increased. Strange. Maybe he was just feeling the pressure of his situation. Everyone from Dumbledore to his classmates had warned him to be careful, and here he was, alone on the street, after dark. Stop it, Potter, or you'll be jumping at your own shadow, Harry chided himself irritably. And if you want to get there before the Dursleys go to bed, you'd better start walking.

So Harry walked.

And walked.

And walked.

It took longer than he thought it would. The station hadn't seemed that far away from home when he'd traveled there by car, and the trunk was definitely slowing him down.

Resisting the urge to stop and rest, Harry focused on his task, and doggedly made his way up the street. "Almost there," he muttered, urging himself on. "Come on. You can do it."

After what seemed like forever, Harry's goal was finally in sight. The charm Mrs. Weasley put on his trunk had helped immeasurably. It was still awkward to carry, but he would have collapsed in exhaustion long ago if it had been at its normal weight.

To make matters worse, Harry had been coping with generalized body aches for several days now. He assumed they were souvenirs of either the TriWizard Tournament, or Voldemort holding him under the Cruciatus Curse. They weren't that bad, really, just annoying. Harry reckoned they would fade completely given time, and hadn't made an issue of them. Now, after carrying his trunk all this way, his arms, shoulders, and back were aching relentlessly.

"Just a few more houses. Not much longer now," he puffed, keeping an eye on the sky. It looked like a storm was brewing. Maybe if his luck held out, he could get indoors before the rain hit.

There it is. Thank goodness. Harry smiled in spite of himself when he reached number four. He hesitated a moment, bracing himself, before entering the fray. Idly, he let his gaze roam over the yard and flowerbeds, then he lifted an eyebrow in confusion.

Aunt Petunia, always conscious of appearances, took great pride in her neat household and immaculate yard. Harry didn't know if she did the work herself while he was away, or if Vernon hired someone to help, but always before when he'd arrived for the summer holidays, the yard was neatly trimmed and edged, and the flowerbeds were a riot of color, without a weed in sight.

Now, however, the yard was beginning to show signs of needing to be cut, and the usually pristine flowerbeds were looking...well, they were looking a bit ragged, really. Like they hadn't been properly tended in a while.

The sight was so unexpected, and so completely out of character for the Dursley family, Harry could only gape in dismay. His exhausted brain searched for a reasonable explanation, even as his heart rate and breathing sped up. Something's wrong! Harry thought wildly, dropping his trunk. Someone must be sick...or hurt...

...or dead, a little voice whispered nastily in the back of his mind. Dead like Cedric.

Harry clenched his fists and dropped into an instinctive crouch. Even as he told himself to stop being so stupid, his eyes flickered randomly from the uncut grass—

There's nothing there.

—to the unswept walk—

Nothing, absolutely nothing! It's so quiet I can hear the street light humming!

—to the small picket sign—

It's getting late. They're probably in bed.

—to the neglected flowerbeds—

Nope. No Death Eaters here...

Wait.

Back up.

A sign??!

Harry frowned through his glasses as he moved closer to investigate. He saw the sign all right, but couldn't quite make out the writing in the dark. As he grew near, the moon peeked out from behind a cloud and lent a little more light to the scene. When Harry was near enough to see, he blinked at the sign in surprise.

Number four Privet Drive was for sale.

Harry stared at the sign for a moment before giving himself a little shake. We're moving! he thought, not entirely sure how he felt about this turn of events. Deciding the Dursley's would likely continue to treat him as they always had, regardless of location, Harry shrugged, and went to fetch his trunk.

You're lucky Ron and Fred and George can't see you right now, Harry grumbled to himself. They'd be laughing themselves sick over the 'Great Harry Potter' acting like a paranoid git.

I reckon they got busy packing and cleaning, Harry mused, then wrinkled his nose. Most likely left all the really nasty jobs for me.

Still, he was cheered in a weird sort of way. Moving was no small task. Perhaps the Dursleys hadn't deliberately left him to make his own way home after all. Harry froze in the act of lifting his trunk. That is so pathetic, he thought ruefully. Most people would be insulted to have been forgotten at all. I'm happy because at least I wasn't forgotten on purpose. Well, I hope I wasn't, anyway.

Harry started toward the house, wishing he could lose the sense of foreboding that had been with him since King's Cross. He wasn't sure if it was just nerves, or if there was really something amiss. All he knew was his senses were on high alert in spite of his peaceful surroundings. It was quite irritating, really. The porch light flared to life as he approached the front door. Here we go, Harry thought somewhat resignedly. Time to get on your game, he counseled himself. Don't let them get to you.

The young wizard waited a few seconds for the door to be thrown open. It would most likely be Vernon. Harry would be yanked unceremoniously into the house, then Uncle Vernon would probably launch into a long speech about how worthless and rude and ungrateful Harry was, et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseam.

The porch light died, startling Harry out of his thoughts.

"Oh, really now," the boy tutted in annoyance. "How childish can one family be?" he fumed, setting down his trunk and raising his hand to knock on the door.

The light clicked back on.

Harry raised his eyebrow again. Are they trying to drive me mad? he wondered as he knocked on the door. Out loud he called, "Uncle Vernon? Aunt Petunia? It's Harry. May I come in?"

Several more seconds ticked by. The door remained firmly shut.

Harry clenched his teeth together and slowly counted to ten when the light clicked off again. He was tired, and he hurt, and he was certainly in no mood for stupid games. With a supreme effort, he refrained from screaming, "Just open the bloody door!" and instead rubbed weary hands under his glasses.

The light clicked on.

Dudley. It has to be Dudley, Harry thought, throwing the porch light a sizzling glare. Colossal prat. He was getting ready to knock again when something occurred to him.

The porch light was new. Upon closer inspection, he saw it was the type with a motion sensor. Harry absently remembered Vernon admiring a similar model at one of the neighbors' houses last summer. There was a small switch on the side that was currently set to "Test." The light flipped off again as the boy studied the switch.

Harry gulped and felt the fine hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Experimentally, he waved a hand in front of the light, and was rewarded when it flared to life.

Realization hit then. Harry closed his eyes, and leaned against the door as he finally figured out what had been bothering him since he first set foot on the property. Except for the porch light the house was completely dark and still.

No night lights.

No telly.

No voices.

Nothing.

Trying to ignore the horrible sinking feeling in his stomach, Harry gathered his nerve, and walked over to the living room window. As he neared, he noticed that the curtains were missing.

Aunt Petunia could be washing... Harry tried before letting the thought die uncompleted. He knew he was grasping at straws. Petunia regularly laundered her window treatments, true, but she always had them back in place before nightfall.

The prickles of alarm on the back of Harry's neck were spreading up to his scalp, and down his spine and arms.

He didn't want to look in that window.

He really didn't want to look in that window.

He wouldn't.

He couldn't.

He had to.

Screwing his courage up one last notch, Harry peered through the glass.

The house was dark and completely empty. The only things in the living room were patches of moonlight on the walls and floor.

Chapter 3 - The Dursleys and Mrs. Figg

Saturday, July 1, 1995

Harry stared wide-eyed at the scene before him, his brain unable to accept what he was seeing. Knowing it was childish, but unable to help himself, he squeezed his eyes shut, waited a couple of seconds, then cautiously opened one eye.

Nope. Still dark. Still empty.

Numb with shock, Harry stumbled back to the door, and sat heavily on his trunk. He was picking up details now that he had overlooked before...like the realtor's lock box on the doorknob. Oh, well done, Captain Obvious. How had he missed that?

The wind was blowing harder, rustling the leaves in the trees, and carrying with it the smell of impending rain. Dark storm clouds completely obscured the moon, and thunder rumbled ominously.

Glassy-eyed, Harry stared straight ahead, not really seeing. Dimly, he realized he must be doing a remarkable imitation of a Petrified person, and it would probably be wise to stir himself and figure out what to do before he got drenched.

Unfortunately, his heart was pounding, his mind was reeling, and he felt about ready to faint or throw up.

Get a hold of yourself! This is no time to panic! the small corner of his brain still capable of rational thought snapped. Unfortunately, the rational part was not currently in complete control.

Are you mental?! the horrified and irrationally overwrought part screeched. This is the perfect time to panic! Your family is gone! You have no place to stay, nowhere to go, you just blew most of your muggle money on a useless train ticket and you hiked all this way to get to an empty house!

Harry clenched his fists and screwed his eyes shut as a fresh wave of adrenaline flooded his body. What was he going to do? He tried to rein in his skittering thoughts, but couldn't seem to manage it. At the moment, running screaming down the street seemed perfectly reasonable...if his legs would support him, this is.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there before a sudden, sharp pain in his hand cut through his body's autonomic response. "Ow!" Harry yelped. He looked around for the source of his discomfort, and discovered he was no longer alone. Hedwig had arrived.

She had also nipped him on the thumb.

Hard.

The snowy owl had her feathers ruffled. She was also clicking her beak and looking at him with a mixture of concern and annoyance. Evidently she had been trying to get his attention for several seconds.

"Hedwig!" Harry swallowed, and took a couple of shaky breaths. Now that he had something else to focus on, he was beginning to shake off the unreasoning fear and re-engage his brain. "Hullo, girl. Sorry about that. Just...just had a bit of a shock."

Hedwig regarded Harry with her large amber eyes, and tilted her head questioningly. Where have you been? What took you so long? she seemed to say.

Harry's eyes grew distant again. "They're gone, Hedwig," he said softly. "We can't get in. We have no place to stay." Harry got a lot of good-natured teasing for talking to his owl like she was human, but he didn't care. They understood each other, and that was all that mattered.

Absently stroking her feathers, Harry paused to observe as the first raindrops began to fall, then continued in a dull monotone. "Uncle Vernon never came to King's Cross. I caught a commuter train. Walked here. Found the house empty. Found them gone..."

Harry stuttered to a stop as the truth hit him like a punch in the gut. His family had abandoned him. He was alone. Somehow saying it out loud made it real. He felt betrayed and deeply hurt, though why he couldn't say.

The Dursley's had never claimed to love him. Heck, they barely claimed to know him. All his life, he'd been an inconvenience--an unwanted and resented burden. Oh, he'd tried to win at least their acceptance when he was younger, but no matter how hard he tried nothing pleased them.

Harry sighed, shaking his head in irritation. He had resigned himself to this fact years ago. He was used to it. He didn't care. It didn't matter. They didn't matter. It shouldn't hurt like this, but it did, dammit, it did!

Stop that. The dryly logical part of his mind was asserting itself again. The same part that allowed him to fight, and eventually throw off the Imperious Curse this past year. Calm down! That's not getting you anywhere.

Yes, Harry agreed. Quite right. Stay calm. Keep your wits. Wasn't that was the cornerstone of every Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson?

Harry hadn't had a Defense professor two years in a row since he started at Hogwarts. The people who had held the position over the last four years had vastly different skill sets, personalities, and teaching styles, but all his Defense professors, the capable and the incompetent alike, had agreed on one fundamental truth: Don't panic.

With effort, Harry managed to refocus, and shove the hurt away. He'd sort that out later. Right now he needed a plan.

He needed a plan, but he'd settle for an idea.

Or a hint.

Even a place to start would be better than nothing. Agitated, the green-eyed boy raked his fingers through his hair. Where were those patented flashes of insight when he needed one?

Known affectionately as the “Gryffindor Trio,” Harry and his best friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger were a nearly unbeatable team. Each brought a different skill set to the mix, and they complimented each other perfectly. Hermione was a veritable walking library, and exceptional with logic and deduction. Ron, though he didn’t always show it, was a brilliant strategist, and quite good at spotting strengths and weaknesses. Harry, like Hermione, was good at figuring things out, but his gift was more erratic. He had a knack for noticing details others missed, and figuring out the big picture from apparently unrelated bits of information.

There was no obvious method, which irritated Hermione to no end. She sometimes had trouble taking things on faith. ‘It just happens, Hermione,’ was far too imprecise an explanation for her tastes, although it was about as close as Harry could come to describing the phenomenon. His “inspirations” were usually triggered by an offhand remark or event. The last puzzle piece would fall into place and he would just know. The inscrutable would suddenly become obvious.

Not that it was doing him any good at the moment. Currently his mind was helplessly and distressingly blank.

“I can’t believe this. It can’t be happening,” Harry muttered, shaking his head in denial. Sensing his agitation, Hedwig made gentle, soothing noises, and rubbed her head against his hand. What in the world am I going to do? I certainly couldn’t stay on the porch all summer. The boy growled in frustration. Drat Dumbledore and his stupid promise, anyway. This wasn’t good. Not good at all. Harry felt his hysteria threatening to rise again, and brutally squelched it. Stop that! he commanded himself, more firmly this time. Focus! You can gibber later.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned against the door. The door! He regarded it thoughtfully. He could easily use the unlocking charm on it, but was it worth the risk? Underage magic was governed by a set of strict laws, and taken very seriously by the Ministry of Magic. Harry

had gotten an official warning the summer before his second year, for magic that wasn't even his doing. If he was caught again, he'd probably be expelled, no questions asked.

Okay, no magic. Harry really didn't want to enter the house, anyway, but if he didn't where could he go? Was anyplace safe?

Hagrid's voice came floating up from memory. The half-giant had once told Harry that there was no place safer than Gringott's, the wizarding bank. Except perhaps Hogwarts. Harry scowled. Fat lot of good that was. Concentrating fiercely, he tried to solve his predicament. After a few minutes, Hedwig hooted, drawing his eyes back to her. When she saw she had his attention, she held out a leg expectantly.

Harry pursed his lips thoughtfully. She was right, of course. He could send a message to someone and be away from Privet Drive in a few hours. The only problem with that plan was the weather. The wind was whipping through the trees now, and the rain was falling fast and hard. Harry knew Hedwig had probably flown through rough weather before, and she would probably be all right, but he felt bad about tossing her out in the rain. He told the owl as much, but filed the idea away for later use if needed.

Unfortunately, staying put until the storm passed wasn't a good option either. The porch was not providing adequate protection. He was already wet from blowing rain, and the wind felt uncomfortably cold. The last thing he needed was for Hedwig or himself to get sick. First priority had to be finding shelter. The question was where? If he couldn't ask Ron or Hermione for help, who was left? Sirius? Professor Lupin?

No, they were helping Professor Dumbledore. Something about rounding up the "old crowd."

Professor Dumbledore was probably insanely busy as well, but he would surely know what to do.

Harry fought a mad urge to laugh as he imagined himself on his headmaster's doorstep. Sorry to bother you, sir, but my relatives have

disappeared. Since I'm not allowed to go to my friends, do you mind if I kip here? Or even better: Yes, Mr. Goblin, I need to be locked in my Gringott's vault for the summer...

The easiest solution, of course, would be to ask one of the neighbors for help, but because of his aunt and uncle, Harry didn't know anyone very well. The first ten years he had lived with the Dursleys, they had kept him in the cupboard under the stairs, and tried to keep his contact with "normal" people to a minimum. Since he had been attending Hogwarts, Vernon had taken to telling everyone that Harry went to St. Brutus' Secure Facility for Incurably Criminal Boys.

Harry pulled a face. Help from that quarter wasn't likely. If he even tried to approach one of them, they'd probably panic and call the police, although...

Weren't you supposed to go to the police when you were in trouble? Harry turned the idea over in his mind. It was an intriguing notion, but no. If he went to the police, and admitted he had been abandoned, and that he was a minor, he would probably wind up in a runaway shelter, or foster care, or an orphanage. Harry shuddered. He had no intention of going to an orphanage. Oh, no. Nonono.

His aunt and uncle had been filling his head with horror stories about muggle orphanages since the beginning of forever. When Harry was much younger, if he dared complain about his cupboard, his measly portions at mealtime, or his ridiculously oversized clothes he would be subjected to a blistering lecture.

Vernon and Petunia would paint themselves as long-suffering saints who took him in, and clothed and fed and sheltered him. They would tell him anyone else would have turned him out on the street or turned him over to an orphanage because of his freakish abnormality. He would be cast as a grasping, greedy little beggar who thought himself too good for what he was so generously given, and was incapable of the smallest bit of gratitude. They would berate him, call him worthless, evil, ungrateful...

Then the threats would begin.

He would be beaten at the orphanage, they said. Starved, abused, and locked in the cellar with the rats. To make sure he got the point, they even began "showing" him small samples of what he would be facing. They withheld food and locked him in his cupboard (with the spiders) as punishment, so that he could better appreciate how good he had it. Over the years it had become habit. Deep down, Harry knew it wasn't right, but he had been effectively trapped. They were his guardians until he was an adult in the eyes of the law. His only option had been to simply keep his head down and wait it out.

The boy sighed and batted the memory away. This wasn't the time to dwell on the past. Harry was realistic enough to realize that his aunt and uncle probably exaggerated the orphanage living conditions, but he'd rather not risk it...just in case. Hadn't Tom Riddle, the boy who'd grown up to become Voldemort lived in a muggle orphanage? Hadn't his experiences there twisted him into the cruel, psychotic killer he had become? And perhaps most importantly, didn't Harry have enough in common with Voldemort without having to live in a bloody orphanage, too? Besides, how would he ever explain Hedwig? And Hogwarts! With his luck, they'd put Hedwig in the zoo aviary, and try to make him go to state school.

So, no police then. And after the scene just after the Third Task, Harry wasn't about to contact the Ministry of Magic either. The Minister, Cornelius Fudge, had been rather friendly to Harry the summer before third year. In fact, Harry had stayed at the Leaky Cauldron at the minister's suggestion. Of course, at the time, Fudge had thought that Sirius Black, an escaped convict from the dreaded wizarding prison Azkaban, was after Harry.

Sirius, as it turned out, had been wrongfully imprisoned, and was innocent of all charges. He was also Harry's godfather. Everything had been sorted out near the end of his third year. The young wizard had been delighted when Sirius offered him a home. Unfortunately, they had not been able to prove Sirius' innocence. His godfather was still a fugitive from the law, and Harry was stuck with the Dursleys. Well, had been stuck, anyway.

Harry frowned moodily. Minister Fudge's behavior the previous week had put him on his guard. The man was in deep denial about

Voldemort's return. Even Albus Dumbledore hadn't been able to convince him the evil wizard was back. Fudge preferred, instead, to believe that Harry was lying or delusional, and that made the boy very, very nervous.

The Leaky Cauldron was an option, Harry supposed, but he was a little afraid of seeking shelter with witches and wizards he didn't know well. Rita Skeeter, a reporter for the Daily Prophet, had written a series of disastrous articles about Harry last year. She tended to wordsmith, and embellish her stories to make them more "complete" and "interesting" when the simple truth was just too bland. She was also fond of inserting leading questions, nasty innuendos, and pieces of absolute fiction into her work, designed to mislead, and sway the reader's opinion.

Despite her reputation as a known troublemaker, or maybe because of it, Rita had many fans. Harry had to admit her work could be compelling. People he loved and respected had fallen into her trap. Mrs. Weasley, for example, had believed one of the articles Rita wrote about Hermione and himself that was published in Witch Weekly. That had taken a bit to get sorted out, but Hermione had gotten revenge.

Harry smiled smugly to himself. Ms. Skeeter was the last of his worries. Hermione had made certain of that. She had discovered that Rita Skeeter was an illegal animagus--a beetle. The hapless reporter was currently residing in an unbreakable jar which was in the hands of one Hermione Granger. Harry almost felt sorry for her.

Hedwig shook the rain from her feathers in annoyance, and Harry let loose an enormous sneeze. "Hang it all!" he grumbled irritably. Okay. Time to stop fooling around and make a decision. He lifted his chin a little defiantly. He would catch the Knight Bus and go to the Leaky Cauldron, at least for tonight. He had tried his best. He wasn't going to be spending this summer at Privet Drive. The headmaster would just have to understand. He didn't need to stay with anyone, really. He was almost fifteen for heaven's sake! He could take care of himself. He didn't need a bloody babysitter!

Babysitter. I wonder... Harry raised a speculative eyebrow. Mrs. Figg was a mad old lady who lived nearby. Until he'd started attending Hogwarts, she had been his primary caretaker when the Dursleys wanted to go on an outing without him. Her house always smelled like cabbage, and she had many, many cats. Harry had never particularly enjoyed going to her house, especially as a young child. She didn't have many distractions to ease his boredom, and he always got a creepy feeling like he was being watched. He usually found himself looking at pictures of her cats, both living and dead, and listening to her rambling commentary as she told him about each and every one.

Still, she had always been kind to him, and they got on well. Perhaps he could ask her for help. It would be presumptuous of him to ask if he could stay for the summer of course, but maybe an arrangement could be made. Thanks to the Dursleys, Harry knew how to cook, clean, garden, and tend the yard. He was also becoming fairly competent at small repairs. Maybe he could earn his keep. Even if it was just a day or two, he'd have time to write Professor Dumbledore, and get contingency instructions. Harry shrugged. It was worth a try. He rose to his feet, only then noticing how tired he was. The rain was still coming down in sheets. Oh, this is going to be cold, Harry thought, as he gathered his things, then pelted toward Mrs. Figg's house.

It was a very wet and cold Harry Potter that came to a panting halt at Mrs. Figg's a few minutes later. He was certain he must have set a land speed record getting there, and he was equally certain that he had never been this wet in his life!

He didn't even think he'd been this wet when he and the other TriWizard champions had been required to retrieve 'what they would sorely miss' from the bottom of Hogwarts Lake. Well, okay, maybe then. But this time Madam Pomphrey isn't standing by with heated blankets and Pepper-Up Potion, Harry thought regretfully.

Hedwig was in a little better condition. She had allowed Harry to bundle her in his overshirt, and had ridden on his trunk during the trip over. Once they'd arrived she'd wasted no time in freeing herself, and was now sitting on Harry's shoulder.

Harry tried to wring out his sodden t-shirt and make himself at least marginally presentable, but quickly gave it up as a lost cause. Firming his resolve, he went over to the door, and rang the bell. He waited a few minutes and tried again. Nothing. Mrs. Figg's rocker was still on the porch, but there was an air of emptiness about the place, similar to his former home on Privet Drive. The boy's shoulders slumped in defeat. She wasn't home. Well this is the perfect ending to a really awful evening, Harry thought grumpily.

In a fit of irritation, he slapped one palm against the door, then jumped back in surprise when it clicked open. What the heck was that? He had felt something, just for a second--a tingling in his hand he had recognized as magic. It was like the door had tensed up, then relaxed. Almost like it recognized him. Very peculiar.

The door was swinging slightly on its hinges. It seemed to be waiting for something. Harry regarded it warily, then asked, "Uh, may I come in?" The door seemed to consider the request, then swung open. Harry and Hedwig looked at each other, then cautiously entered the house. The door allowed them entrance, but slammed shut as soon as they were across the threshold. Again, Harry felt the slight tingle of magic. Locking charm, he realized. A fancy one capable of recognition.

Harry stood dripping in the entryway, stunned speechless for what seemed like the millionth time that day. Is Mrs. Figg a witch? It seemed like an odd notion, but it must be true. The door was proof of that.

Curious, he looked around his familiar surroundings. The feeling of being watched that he found so unnerving as a child was still there. Harry now knew, after spending so much time at the Burrow, that the house was watching him, after a fashion. According to Mrs. Weasley, magical structures and places where witches and wizards lived developed a certain awareness over time. Harry was suddenly very glad that he had always minded his manners when he stayed with Mrs. Figg.

He eagerly looked around for other hints that this was a witch's home, but everything else was disappointingly normal. Very muggle. The

house looked just like it always had, from the cats and crocheted Afghans on the couch to the faint odor of cabbage in the air. He had just had time to absently wonder who was taking care of the cats, when all of them went running into the kitchen. Harry followed, and watched as the feeding dishes lined neatly against the wall suddenly filled with food. Rather like the beginning of a Hogwarts feast. "Cool," he remarked aloud, and got the feeling the house was flattered.

Leaving the cats to their dinner, Harry wandered back into the living room. "I wonder where Mrs. Figg is," he said thoughtfully. She wasn't gone for good like the Dursleys, but the condition of the house hinted that she expected to be away for a while. The boy looked up, startled, when the wall clock chimed. He frowned, puzzled. It was only a few minutes after the hour. Curious, Harry moved closer to the clock. It shimmered, and a Concealing Charm fell away. There, under the "normal" facade, was a locator clock, similar to the one at the Weasleys. The hand that read "Arabella Figg" was currently pointing to "Hogwarts."

Arabella Figg? Harry was dumbstruck. Wasn't she one of the "old crowd" Professor Dumbledore had sent Sirius to fetch? Well, obviously, you daft git. She's at Hogwarts, isn't she? Harry impatiently answered himself. He mumbled a polite "thank you" to the clock, and watched, fascinated, as it reverted back to its former state. Well, that was it. If Mrs. Figg was involved with whatever Professor Dumbledore was planning, heaven only knew when she'd be back, and she probably wouldn't have time for the likes of him. The Leaky Cauldron it is, then.

Harry sneezed again, and shivered slightly. On balance, he supposed he could stay long enough to change into some dry clothes. Maybe I could have a little rest as well, he thought with a jaw-popping yawn as his gaze fell longingly on the sofa, and catch the Knight Bus first thing tomorrow morning. Wait. Did the Knight Bus run in the daytime? Harry shook his head as he took a change of clothes from his trunk, and headed for the bathroom. He had no clue. Better go ahead and leave tonight, he decided. He didn't fancy being trapped in Mrs. Figg's house until nightfall tomorrow, and really, there was no point in dawdling.

When Harry emerged a few minutes later, he felt a little more human. His body was still chilled, and his hair was still wet, but he was considerably less bedraggled than he'd been before.

Mrs. Figg was always complaining about the number of plastic shopping bags that seemed to accumulate in her home, so Harry reckoned she wouldn't mind if he took one or two to hold his wet things. He paused long enough to mop up the water he'd tracked in, then prepared to go. He pulled out his warm cloak, his wand, and his wizard money, then re-packed and shut his trunk.

"I guess we should be going," Harry said to Hedwig, who hooted her agreement, and flew over to perch on his shoulder again. He started to walk, but stopped when he felt something bumping against his calf. Ah. The cats had surely finished eating by now. Someone must want to be petted. Without looking, Harry bent down, and reached behind him to stroke... cardboard? What in the world?

It wasn't a cat trying to get his attention, but rather a medium sized moving box. Harry decided this was just too weird for words. Even weirder, when the thing had his attention, it settled down and started acting perfectly normal. The box was taped shut, and tied with string. There wasn't really anything remarkable about it. Besides the label that is. Harry's eyebrows almost touched his hairline when he read: PROPERTY OF HARRY JAMES POTTER.

Before he had time to consider how strange it might sound, he addressed the box. "Erm...Y-you want to come with me?" He got his reply when the box slid over to his trunk, then stacked itself neatly on top of it. Harry waffled for a minute. On one hand, it seemed a lot like stealing, but on the other hand, it did have his name on it. Harry blinked a couple of times then sighed in resignation. This was just too bizarre, and he was too exhausted to argue.

Especially with a box.

In the end, he settled for scribbling a short note to Mrs. Figg, explaining what had happened, and apologizing if he'd made a mistake.

When he'd finished, Harry bundled Hedwig up again, though it wasn't raining quite so hard now. "Bye now, and thanks," he said to the listening air in Mrs. Figg's house. He picked up his belongings, and strode back into the storm. "One more trip, and we should be finished," he told Hedwig. "This has been a really weird night," he mused as he lifted his wand and signaled the Knight Bus.

Chapter 4 - Hogwarts

Saturday, July 1, 1995

Hogwarts! Arabella Figg thought with a pleasant sense of nostalgia. How I've missed the old place! She looked around the large meeting room from her place between Remus Lupin and Arthur Weasley. They, along with several others were seated around a large table.

Curious, Arabella looked around at the faces of her companions. She had fought shoulder-to-shoulder with most of them during Voldemort's first rise to power. There were about a dozen witches and wizards currently present. Arabella noted small smiles on other faces besides her own, and listened to the quiet chatter. Obviously she was not the only one reminiscing fondly about her school days. The atmosphere would likely change, once the meeting started, but for now the old witch was content to sit back and enjoy the warm feeling of homecoming. Hogwarts always seemed to welcome its alumni back, no matter how many years had passed since their graduation.

After a few travel-stained latecomers and some of the Hogwarts staff arrived, Minerva McGonagall stood, and called for quiet. Her next words were both chilling and strangely exhilarating to all present:

"The Order of the Phoenix has re-convened."

The Order of the Phoenix was not new, of course. It had existed since the time of the Hogwarts founders. Its purpose was to protect the wizarding community from the threat of evil witches and wizards. There were hints that it might have existed even before then, but no written records were kept before the days of Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin.

Membership in the Order was not to be taken lightly. At the lowest level, membership meant fighting until the current threat was neutralized, or the member could no longer fight because of death or grievous injury. At the highest level, the level she and many of those present held, membership meant that she would fight until the current

threat was neutralized, and she would be called on, as long as she was able, any time a new threat reared its ugly head.

The deputy headmistress turned the meeting over to Albus Dumbledore, who stood, and began to speak. He advised them that this was a war council, and Voldemort had regained his body. Before proceeding, he offered anyone who wished it, a chance to leave...no questions asked. When no one moved, he smiled gratefully, and thanked them for their continued support.

After the Order members renewed their pledge of service, and oath of secrecy, Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix flew majestically into the room, and landed on the table. Slowly, he moved to stand before all present, staring them intently in the eye, as though measuring their worthiness for the task at hand. When he had finished, Fawkes lifted his head, and trilled a strangely triumphant sounding note before spreading his beautiful red and gold wings, and flying over to his perch on the back of Dumbledore's chair.

The Hogwarts Headmaster stroked the phoenix fondly, seeming to gather his thoughts, before turning to face the assemblage. Speaking concisely, and clearly, he began to sketch out the truth behind the Potters' betrayal, and events of June 24th. The story wasn't completely new to Belle, of course. Remus and Sirius had told her the short version when they came to her almost a week ago.

After Remus had stopped her from hexing Sirius, that is.

They had told her about Sirius' innocence as well as the Third Task. Arabella shook her head. Switched secret keepers...illegal anamagi...death eaters posing as professors...poor Harry facing Voldemort again...

It was enough to give a person a headache.

She still couldn't believe Peter Pettigrew had been the traitor. It wasn't that she still thought Sirius was guilty, indeed, she was fiercely glad he wasn't, but Peter Pettigrew of all people! He just didn't seem to be capable of it.

Peter had always presented a pleasant exterior, and appeared to be very malleable and low key. He was quiet, almost to the point of seeming timid, didn't have much in the way of looks, and wasn't exactly brilliant at magic. Arabella frowned slightly. Peter Pettigrew evidently had more layers than they gave him credit for. Belle sadly wondered if anyone had truly known him.

Sirius Black, on the other hand, was almost a perfect counterpoint to Peter. He was exceptionally bright, devastatingly handsome, and loyal to a fault. A Gryffindor to his toenails, Sirius was sometimes brash and reckless, and could be alarmingly volatile, acting first and thinking later. He had a formidable temper, and was not above holding an occasional grudge. Some had always thought him a bit mad. It had been entirely too easy to believe that Sirius had made a rash decision in a fit of pique. Or, as others speculated, that he'd cracked under the pressure of being the Potters' Secret Keeper.

Looking back, Arabella couldn't believe they'd been duped the way they had. Sirius might have his faults, but he was absolutely transparent. He made no excuses or apologies. What you saw was what you got. If anyone had taken even one moment to think they would have remembered that Sirius was absolutely devoted to his friends! But no. It had seemed to be an open and shut case. No one had suspected. Even Dumbledore hadn't known.

Albus had reached the point in the story where Cedric and Harry had been portkeyed to Voldemort. Belle listened, stunned anew, as Dumbledore filled in all the details. Harry had managed to throw off the Imperious Curse after being wounded in the tournament, stabbed in the arm, and held under the Cruciatus Curse twice?! Arabella shook her head in stunned disbelief. She wasn't sure she would--or could--have done as well if put in the same situation. Then again, Harry had always been an exceptional child.

James and Lily's bright-eyed baby had possessed a calm, easygoing nature. He rarely cried, and was absolutely fearless, which pleased and horrified his parents by turns. Since Harry had inherited his parents' most striking features, people, magical and muggle alike, seemed drawn to him. Whenever they went out, the Potters would be stopped repeatedly and told what a beautiful baby they had. James

and Lily, though pleased and proud, had initially worried that all the attention would spoil Harry. Luckily, the baby seemed quite able to take all the gushing praise in stride.

Though remarkably tolerant of strangers, the boy's reactions to people varied. Sometimes he would take to a new person right away, at other times he seemed to reserve judgement, and occasionally, he would get quiet and wary. James liked call it "The Potter Approval Rating." Harry had accepted all his parents' friends immediately, of course.

Everyone except Peter, that is.

Now that she thought about it, Harry would become agitated, sometimes even cry when Peter tried to hold him. She had witnessed it herself on more than one occasion, and Lily had mentioned it quite a few times over tea. The Potters had tried to get Harry to warm up to Peter on numerous occasions with no success. He would tolerate being in the same room with Pettigrew only if others were present. If someone would hold him, so much the better. Remus and Sirius thought it was hilariously funny, and would tease Peter about pinching the baby, and needing to bathe regularly, but Harry's reaction bothered James and Lily to no end. Especially since he seemed to love Sirius and Remus as much as his parents did.

Lily had quietly confessed her frustration to Belle on one occasion, unable to figure out why her son hated Peter so much. Arabella remembered laughing at the young witch, and accusing her of becoming spoiled herself because Harry was normally so easy to care for.

"You're reading too much into it," she had scoffed, while pouring tea. "All babies fuss." She gestured fondly at the topic of their discussion, who was making short work of the biscuit he'd been given. "He doesn't even know what hate is." Lily had grinned a little sheepishly, and conceded the point. They had moved on to other subjects, and not spoken of Peter again.

Arabella sighed quietly. Less than two months later, Lily and James had been killed. As improbable as it sounded, she had to wonder.

Had Harry somehow sensed the coming betrayal? It was all so obvious, now that the fog of shock, anger, and grief had lifted. There had been subtle little hints and clues, but no one had caught them, or appreciated their significance.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and dragged her attention back to the present. This had already been a long session, and they still had a lot to cover. Of course, initial meetings always tended to be lengthy affairs. When Dumbledore finished laying the groundwork, it would be time to hear from any informants, and decide on a course of action. Belle groaned inwardly. They would probably spend the better part of the first hour just introducing themselves. Hopefully, Albus would finish soon, and if he had any kindness in his heart at all, he would let them have a short break before continuing. Arabella wanted to floo back to her house and check her locator clock.

For the last few days, she and Mundugus Fletcher had been helping Sirius and Remus track down many of the others seated around the table. It had been a lot of work, and almost constant traveling, but she had made time to floo back to her house in Surrey earlier that evening when Harry was due back from Hogwarts. It had been her intent to verify that his clock hand was pointing to 4 Privet Drive, before dashing off to the meeting Dumbledore had called.

She had gotten a bit of a surprise when she had stumbled out of her fireplace, however. The clock hand with Harry's name on it was still pointing to "Traveling."

Mrs. Figg hadn't known what to make of it. The circumstances were highly irregular. Vernon Dursley usually stopped by the train station on his way home from work, collected Harry, and came straight home. Always before, Harry had been safely sequestered behind the wards and protective spells surrounding #4 Privet Drive before suppertime. He should have been home by now. Why wasn't he? Belle had considered the clock again before moving to the fireplace. The situation was unusual, but Harry didn't seem to be in any immediate danger. His clock hand was pointing to "Traveling" not "Mortal Peril," or "Hospital," or "Prison." All that meant was he had not reached his final destination for the evening. It was possible that he and the Dursleys had been detained.

Arabella frowned lightly as she listened to Dumbledore field a question about Rita Skeeter's "Disturbed and Dangerous" article. If the reporter had been present, she would have cheerfully strangled her. Minister Fudge, too. Albus was right. They needed to band together quickly, and rally as much support as possible before Voldemort gained a strong toe hold. Lack of Ministry support would make the task more difficult, but they'd have to manage, somehow. The alternative, Voldemort regaining full power, was just too terrible to contemplate.

Mrs. Figg found her attention wandering again, as Dumbledore was interrupted by yet another question. Obviously, some of the people here were hearing the story for the first time.

Discreetly, she peeked at the last sheet of parchment in the stack in front of her. Before she had flooed to Hogwarts from Surrey, she had cast a quick spell that would notify her when Harry's hand moved, and where it moved to. The information was supposed to appear on that sheet of parchment, but so far there had been nothing.

Arabella frowned lightly. It was ridiculously late, now. Something should have happened. Perhaps she had made a mistake with the spell in her haste to leave.

"...and those are the events before, during, and immediately following the last task of the TriWizard Tournament. If there are no further questions, we'll take a short break, then we can re-convene and discuss our options." Albus Dumbledore paused, and looked around the meeting table. His blue eyes twinkled with amusement as he watched Arabella Figg practically leap from her seat, and make a beeline for the fireplace. "Are you leaving us, Arabella?"

The witch turned to face him, her hand already full of floo powder. "I just need to check something, Albus. Won't be a moment." She threw the glittering powder into the fireplace, and was gone in a flash.

Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, and Arthur Weasley traded glances. "What's she on about?" Sirius wondered aloud, as the three men moved closer to the fireplace.

Remus shrugged. "I don't know, but I think something may be up," he said with a concerned frown. Arabella had been unusually tense during the first part of the meeting. It showed in her body language, and her scent.

Sirius felt his anxiety rise up a notch. He had a healthy respect for Remus Lupin's werewolf senses. Several minutes ticked by in silence, as the three wizards waited for Belle to return. When the meeting attendees began wandering back to their seats at the table, Dumbledore strode over to the fireplace.

"Arabella Figg!" he called, throwing a handful of floo powder in the fireplace.

Mrs. Figg's head appeared in the fireplace almost immediately, but her attention seemed focused on the far wall. "Albus," she said tensely, "I think we may have a problem."

She spoke quietly, but Sirius caught what she said. Remus and Arthur had their ears pricked up as well.

"Harry hasn't arrived at his aunt and uncle's house yet," Arabella reported. "He's never been this late coming back from Kings Cross station."

Dumbledore frowned, then turned to Arthur Weasley. "Did Molly tell you when Harry's uncle arrived?"

"No, Headmaster." the red-haired wizard responded. "She just mentioned that he was over an hour late, and if he hadn't showed up when he did, she would have taken Harry home with her."

Albus nodded absently. "Arabella, do you know where Harry is now?"

The witch shook her head. "Not precisely. The clock still says 'Traveling.'" Before anyone could respond, she bristled defensively. "I know it doesn't appear to be a cause for alarm, but he's never been this late before, and I don't like it!"

Dumbledore held up a pacifying hand. "No one is accusing you of being alarmist, Belle. I am merely trying to gather all available facts."

"I apologize, Albus, I just feel a little edgy--wait! It's moving!" Arabella watched expectantly as Harry's clock hand rotated until it was resting on "4 Privet Drive." She turned back to the fireplace, beaming. "He's there. He's safe."

Her words broke the tension that had begun to build. Sirius released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding, and traded relieved grins with Albus, Remus and Arthur.

"Headmaster? Are we ready to continue?" Severus Snape, the Hogwarts Potion Master asked, as he approached the group by the fireplace. He jumped back when the fire blazed, and Arabella Figg tumbled out.

"Of course, Severus," Dumbledore said, leading the way back to the conference table. "Mrs. Figg was concerned because Mr. Potter had not been taken back to his relatives' home. He only arrived just now."

"I fail to see the cause for alarm," Snape sneered dismissively. He stopped when he noticed Arabella and Sirius glaring at him. "I merely meant, Potter's family probably took him out to the muggle cinema, or some other inane distraction to distract him from his recent misfortune," he clarified. When the others stared at him like he'd grown another head, the potion master grew irritated. "Albus wrote the boy's family did he not?" he demanded, as he and the others followed Dumbledore back to the meeting table.

"Harry's aunt and uncle don't usually take him out," Belle growled softly as they reached their destination, her hand itching to slap the superior smirk off the other wizard's face.

"I apologize for the delay," Dumbledore said as they rejoined the others at the table. "Severus has some information for us, then we will entertain suggestions on the best way to proceed."

Snape stood up at his place, and scowled at the others around the table. "I have been successful in contacting Voldemort, and am

working on getting back into his inner circle. He does not trust me yet, so I do not know his plans, but he has tasked me to make a strong memory potion..."

As Arabella listened to Snape's report, she relaxed. As much as she hated to admit it, he was probably right. Since it was the weekend, Vernon could have brought his entire family to London for the day. After collecting Harry at the station, they could have had plans before returning home. While it wasn't a usual circumstance, the Dursleys had been known to take young Potter out on occasion, especially when she wasn't available to look after him. They'd taken him along on their outing to the zoo a few years ago, after all.

At any rate, Harry was safely back at Privet Drive, and as soon as she completed one more mission she would be back in Surrey as well. I'll check on him as soon as I get back, she promised herself, as she picked up her wand and quietly canceled the notifying charm. I'll invite him to tea, or ask Petunia if he can run an errand for me. Mollified for now, she put her wand away, and returned her attention to the meeting.

Unnoticed, in her little house in Little Whinging, Surrey, the locator clock hand marked "Harry Potter" moved to "Wisteria Walk," then "Traveling," before finally coming to rest on "Unknown".

Chapter 5 - The Leaky Cauldron

Sunday, July 2, 1995

Sunlight poured through the windows of room 11, splashing cheerfully on the walls, making golden rectangles on the floor, and creeping slowly across the face of the sleeping figure on the bed.

Harry Potter groaned in protest, and burrowed deeper into the blankets. He didn't want to wake up. Not yet, anyway. For the first time in days, he had slept all night without being plagued by nightmares. The teen suspected this might be due to his level of exhaustion the night before, but was grateful for the reprieve none the less.

Without opening his eyes, Harry stretched hugely, wriggling his fingers and toes, and flinching slightly at the lingering soreness in his arms and shoulders.

I suppose I should get up, the boy thought sleepily, letting his limbs fall onto the bed with a soft plop. A shower might help with the stiffness. If he hurried he might be able to bathe before Aunt Petunia came to wake him, but he didn't want to move. He was extremely comfortable. Deliciously warm and refreshed. Happy even. If he didn't know better, he'd swear he was in his large four-poster bed back in Gryffindor Tower.

Hold on...

Since when had he been able to sprawl spread-eagled on his little bed at the Dursleys' without hitting the wall, or having an arm or leg slip off the edge of the mattress?

Wakefulness came in a rush. Harry sat up quickly, trying to disentangle himself from the bedcovers, get his bearings, and find his glasses. Things went much more smoothly once he stopped trying to accomplish all three tasks at once.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Harry slipped his glasses on his nose, and managed to identify his whereabouts as the Leaky Cauldron. He had just started to relax again, when a cheery voice chirped, "good morning!" making him leap to his feet, and glance warily around.

There was no one in the room but himself and Hedwig, and she certainly hadn't said anything. The snowy owl was still sleeping on a perch by the window, with her head tucked under her wing. Harry frowned in confusion, then it dawned on him who, or rather what, had just spoken. With a sheepish grin, he turned to face the mirror, and replied, "good morning."

"Well, I must say, you're certainly looking better than you did last night," the mirror continued pleasantly. "You were a right sorry sight, you were."

Last night.

Harry felt his contented mood evaporate like early morning mist.

Last night he had made his bleary way to the Leaky Cauldron.

Last night he had discovered his childhood home empty, and the Dursleys gone.

Last night, Tom, the innkeeper, had taken one look at him, and immediately hustled him off to bed.

Tired as he was, Harry had been aware of the older wizard's attitude, and had been heartened by it. Tom hadn't asked questions, or refused him service, or given him frightened, suspicious looks. He'd merely cast Locomotor on Harry's trunk and box while gently steering the shell-shocked Gryffindor up the stairs. When the boy had mumbled something about needing to check in, the old innkeeper had waved it off, assuring him that everything could be sorted out in the morning. He hadn't even had Harry sign the guest register.

The young wizard shook his head ruefully. He supposed he had looked pretty pathetic when he'd arrived. Harry hadn't bothered to close all the fastenings on his cloak, so when he raised his wand to

signal the Knight Bus, it was caught by the wind and blown open. As luck would have it, when the Knight Bus responded to his summons, it materialized over a huge puddle, and dropped into it with a spectacular splash.

Caught by surprise, Harry was hit with the backlash, and had been completely drenched. His sturdy cloak had been of little help, held in place by the one closed fastener at his throat, and flapping uselessly behind him like a flag.

The only good thing about that entire fiasco, was the talkative conductor, Stan Shunpike, and the driver, Ernie Prang, had been so mortified, they hadn't recognized him. Not, Harry reflected wryly, that he'd been exactly recognizable at the time.

Thinking back, Harry doubted they would have noticed if he'd been green with purple polka dots. Stan and Ernie had been so shaken up by the incident they hadn't even been able to manage a simple drying charm. This was obviously a matter of professional pride. The Knight Bus simply did not soak its patrons. By the way they were acting, Harry imagined it was written as a cardinal rule in some great tome somewhere, entitled Rules and Regulations for Knight Bus Personnel. Probably in the chapter called Offenses That Will Get You Sacked.

The driver and conductor had both fussed and clucked around Harry, apologizing repeatedly for the mishap. Stan fetched a warm blanket for the shivering boy to wrap up in, while Ernie pressed a steaming cup of hot chocolate into his hands. Harry had accepted their apologies, and tried to reassure them as best he could. The anxious pair had been more than eager to let Harry ride for free, but the boy had protested. It was just a stupid accident after all, and they had done their best to make things right. In the end, Harry had been given a discounted fare, complimentary hot chocolate, and a shiny red toothbrush before the Knight Bus lurched forward with a flash and a BANG, headed directly for Diagon Alley.

Pulling his attention back to the present, Harry moved closer to the mirror, and studied his reflection with curious green eyes. At least Tom was able to manage a proper drying charm, the boy thought

gratefully, plucking experimentally at his t-shirt, and running questioning fingers through his dark hair.

Harry had been so tired the night before, he'd only paused long enough to shed his cloak, and kick off his shoes before collapsing gratefully into bed. He had expected, upon waking, to find himself in desperate need of a shower--his hair, skin, and clothing dry from Tom's charm, but grimy and stiff. This wasn't the case, however. To his pleasant surprise, everything felt soft and fresh, as though he'd already changed and showered. Tom had apparently slipped in a cleaning charm or two while he was at it. There was no trace of his having been doused with dirty puddle-water the night before.

The mirror had fallen curiously silent, which Harry found odd. He hadn't run across an enchanted mirror yet that could refrain from commenting on his hair and clothing, but the awareness was definitely not there at the moment, so Harry shrugged, and moved over to the window.

Judging by the sun's position, he'd slept longer than he realized. It had to be well past lunchtime. Harry frowned pensively as he looked out over Diagon Alley, forcing himself to consider his circumstances.

Last night he'd been responding to an acute crisis. He'd been cognizant of his situation, of course, but finding shelter had been his one clear goal. That and keeping his cool. He hadn't really been in any fit state to make future plans.

Harry's frown deepened slightly. Staying calm and focused had been remarkably difficult last night. He didn't understand why, though. Every Defense class began with a common theme: Don't panic. The idea was so obvious, it almost didn't seem worth mentioning. Even Hermione, who almost never criticized a lesson, had complained about the Defense professors' fixation on something so simple. Harry and Ron had agreed with her, and they'd had many silly conversations debating whether the Defense professors thought they were all too stupid to remember, or if absent-mindedness was a requirement for the Defense Against the Dark Arts job.

After last night's practical application, however, Harry realized that there was more to it than he thought. Panic--fight or flight--was the body's natural reaction to stress. Staying reasonably calm under stress was difficult, but regaining control after you'd lost it was an act of will. He'd been scared before, even panicked, but not like last night. Never to the point where his brain had stopped functioning completely, and he'd been at the mercy of his autonomic nervous system. He wondered nervously how long it would have taken him to pull himself together if Hedwig hadn't been there.

Harry padded back over to the bed and sat on it, drawing his legs up to his chest, and propping his chin on his kneecaps. Truthfully, he felt a little shamed by his reaction. Things could have been much worse, after all. He could have arrived at his uncle's house and found the Dark Mark in the sky. He could have peered in the living room window, and discovered the Dursleys' tortured, murdered bodies. He could have been re-captured by Voldemort's Death Eaters while wandering around alone. And honestly, compared to facing basilisks, evil wizards, and (purported) crazed murderers, this was nothing. Why had finding the empty house unhinged him so?

Maybe it was because he'd been at a low point. Maybe it was because he'd been caught utterly off guard. Maybe it was both. He'd been shaky with exhaustion when he'd arrived at Privet Drive--traumatized and heartsick over Cedric's death and Voldemort's revival. Although not exactly a haven, Privet Drive had represented a constant in his life--something safely predictable. When he'd approached the house, he hadn't been expecting anything out of the ordinary.

Harry frowned lightly as he continued to analyze his reaction. Perhaps that was the key. His other adventures might seem more horrific, but those times he had known the danger going in. He had been aware of the magical traps surrounding the Sorcerer's Stone. He knew there was a basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. And face it, with the media blitz that had followed, it would have been hard not to know about Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban. Even last week, when he had fallen so gracelessly into Voldemort's trap, he'd been keyed up and ready for action because of the TriWizard Tournament. Heck, he'd been alert and edgy all year.

Last night had been different, though. For the first time in recent memory he'd been completely blind sided--gormless, trusting prat that he was. Oh, he had been expecting the Dursleys to be horrible to him, and had been bracing for an absolutely dreadful holiday, but he had never once suspected that they would simply abandon him.

Harry snorted mirthlessly. After the way they carried on about politeness and manners, one would think they would have had the common courtesy to inform him of their plans.

Perhaps that was why keeping calm was emphasized so, Harry pondered abstractly. It wasn't so much for when danger was expected, but rather for when you were hit with life's little sucker punches.

Perhaps if you were drilled on something until it became second nature, your chances of recalling it under stress improved.

Interesting theory, Harry mused, a bit surprised at his own acuity. He'd have to ask Ron and Hermoine what they thought the next time he saw them.

Ron and Hermione. Harry tried to swallow past the lump in his throat. Reflexively, he thought of waking Hedwig, and sending a letter. But to whom? And to say what? Harry knew Sirius would come running if he called, as would the Weasleys. Dr. Granger had even given him permission to ring them up if he needed help, but nothing had changed. It still wasn't safe.

Besides, Harry reflected in a moment of brutal self-honesty, he wasn't ready to face his friends yet. His feelings were still too bruised and raw, and to make matters worse, he felt half eaten alive with bitter jealousy. He didn't want to have to observe loving family interaction at the moment. Maybe later, but not just yet. Right now he just wanted to lick his wounds, and nurse his injured pride in private.

Professor Dumbledore, was another problem. His headmaster had always insisted that Harry stay in muggle world with the Dursleys. Something about ancient protective magic, and blood relatives. If

Harry admitted his predicament, what would happen? Students were not allowed to stay at Hogwarts over the summer holidays. Would he be turned over to muggle or wizard social services? Did wizards even have social services? Would a new guardian be appointed for him? Could one be? Between Rita Skeeter's slander and his dubious honor of being number one on Voldemort's hit list it was highly unlikely that he'd be overwhelmed with eager volunteers.

As he considered this, Harry was struck with a terrible thought. What if Dumbledore tracked down his muggle family and bullied them into taking him back! Harry shuddered reflexively, deciding that had to be prevented if at all possible. His relative's dismissal had cut deeply, but that didn't mean he was eager to return to their less-than-tender care.

No. His best bet was to simply keep his mouth shut until it was safe to visit his friends. All I have to do is keep my head down, and stay out of sight, Harry thought with an ironic smile. Just like back on Privet Drive. If he was lucky, maybe they wouldn't find out at all!

Harry brightened, and latched onto that thought at once. Generally, when Ron wrote extending an invitation for Harry to come stay at the Burrow, he did so in advance, and he always let Harry know when his family would be coming. All he had to do was write back straightaway, and insist on making his own way to the Burrow, or maybe arrange to meet the Weasleys here at the Leaky Cauldron instead of Privet Drive. He could say the Dursleys refused to allow the Weasleys to come by because of Fred and George's prank. This could work! It wasn't like anyone regularly popped 'round to check on him. He'd never be missed. All he had to do now was sort out a few practical, long-term problems.

The Dursleys hadn't gone out of their way for him, and had insisted that he do any number of chores to "earn his keep," but they had given him food, clothing, and shelter. He might not have lived in the lap of luxury, but he'd had life's necessities, and all it had cost him was a little sweat and a lot of aggravation.

It could be worse, really, the teen admitted to himself. Much worse. He might be abandoned and alone, but he wasn't completely without

resources. Harry had never bothered to tell his Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia about his inheritance. Hagrid had given him the key to what was now his Gringott's vault on his eleventh birthday. Inside, he discovered his parents had left him a sizable pile of wizarding money. Harry had been using it to pay for his school expenses ever since, because Uncle Vernon had refused to finance his magical education.

Everything had been going smoothly. Except for his impromptu "vacation" summer before third year, the boy had never had any opportunities for impulse purchases. Even then, he had been cautious, exercising a lot of self control, and learning the basics of money management.

Now, in addition to his usual school supplies, he was looking at the cost of lodging, clothing, food, new glasses, transportation, any necessary medical expenses, and heaven only knew what else, this summer, next summer, and for the rest of his life! With a start, Harry realized he didn't even know if he was in trouble or not. He had no idea how much those things cost, though if Vernon's carrying on was to be believed, it was a lot. He also had no idea how much money was in his vault. How did the wizard bank work? Did Gringott's charge fees and pay interest like muggle banks? Harry had no clue. Before now, it hadn't been an issue.

The cost of a year at Hogwarts barely seemed to make a dent in the piles of Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts. Harry had reckoned he had enough to pay for school, support himself after graduation while he got himself established, and still have loads left over. He had whiled away many lonely hours at Privet Drive dreaming about what he would like to do when he finally left forever. If he didn't start working right away, it might be fun to take a little time off, or attend university, or travel. He'd once jokingly considered going to Brazil, and looking up his friend, the boa constrictor.

Not much chance of that now.

A knock at his door made Harry look up sharply. He watched uncertainly, as the door opened slightly, and Tom poked his head in. "Good day, Mr. Potter," he said pleasantly. "Sorry to disturb you, but I usually tidy up about now."

"Hello, Tom, and it's Harry, please."

Tom nodded, and looked the boy over. He seemed better than last night, rested, anyway, but he was practically vibrating with tension and worry, and he looked extremely skittish.

Harry watched idly as Tom inspected the room. There wasn't really anything to be done, except make the bed. Obliging, he rose and stood off to the side, while Tom cast a bed-making charm and a few dust banishing charms. "Thank you," he said quietly, as the old wizard finished. "And thanks for taking care of me last night."

"That's part of my job, Harry," Tom grinned. "It's always a pleasure having you stay here."

The boy looked up at him, a kind of wounded disbelief in his expressive green eyes. "Really?" he asked, sounding ridiculously uncertain. "I mean, I thought with all the rubbish in the Daily Prophet...and things...I wasn't sure if I'd be welcome."

Tom went over to stand in front of the boy, and looked down at him, amazed. For the first time since he'd been brought back to the wizard community, Harry Potter had sounded like the child he was, and not the fabled "Boy-Who-Lived." Tom had suspected something was amiss the night before, but Harry had been dead on his feet, so he hadn't pressed for details. Now that he was certain his suspicions were correct, and hastened to reassure the boy. Perhaps it was something he could help with.

Guessing what was likely causing the youth the most distress, he didn't respond directly to Harry's stuttered confession, but mentioned casually instead, "You know, Hagrid stopped by to see me before he left on his errand for Dumbledore."

Harry didn't say anything, but he raised a questioning eyebrow. Tom, seeing he had the boy's attention, continued. "Hagrid told me about the TriWizard Tournament, and You-Know-Who," he said, almost grinning at Harry's dumbstruck expression. "He asked me to keep my eyes and ears open, and report anything interesting to your

headmaster." This time the boy's reaction surprised him. Surely that wasn't fear he saw?

"Are you going to tell him I'm here?"

Tom was startled by the tremulous query. "Why don't you tell me what happened first," he suggested reasonably.

Harry didn't answer immediately, but instead met Tom's gaze for a moment, making the older wizard feel oddly exposed. Evidently the boy found what he was looking for, because after a moment he nodded, and relaxed a bit. Haltingly at first, then with more speed, the teen began to verbalize what had happened the night before, and some of the concerns he'd been thinking of since awakening. To Harry's dismay, he told a lot more than he intended, but once he got started, the story just came pouring out. Tom's experience as a bartender showed clearly as the boy's tale unfolded. He knew when to gently prompt, when to ask questions, and when to simply sit and listen.

He did take offense at Harry's worries about Dumbledore, though, and gently chided the boy. "Harry, you don't honestly believe that Albus Dumbledore would be daft enough to put you back with those horrid muggles after they abandoned you, do you?"

Harry had shrugged, and studied the carpet a minute before mumbling, "I don't know what to believe anymore. I don't know what to do."

Tom studied the boy intently for a moment, before relenting. "I'll make you a deal, Harry," he finally stated, making the younger wizard look up in surprise. "You've had a shock, and I understand that you probably want a little time to yourself, so I won't tell Dumbledore you're here--" He stopped and held up a cautioning hand when Harry broke into a relieved grin. "I won't tell him you're here, yet. I do expect you to contact Professor Dumbledore, and your friends, but you can get yourself sorted out first. Fair enough?"

Harry considered this for a minute, then nodded reluctantly.

"Excellent!" Tom said brightly, clapping Harry on the shoulder. He chuckled when the boy's stomach announced that it was empty. Harry flushed slightly, then shrugged with a sheepish grin. "Perhaps you'd care for a late lunch," Tom offered kindly, "or at least a snack before dinner?"

Harry's smile became more genuine. "Yes, please. Can I bring Hedwig, too?"

"Very well," Tom motioned for the teen to follow him. "Let's head down to the kitchen. After you've finished, we'll get you checked in, and logged in the register."

Harry nodded absently, pausing to step into his shoes, and wake his sleeping owl before following Tom downstairs. Hedwig hooted happily from her perch on his shoulder when the old wizard disappeared into the kitchen, and returned a few minutes later with a light meal for Harry and herself. When Tom placed the food on the table, she fluttered off of Harry's shoulder, and both attacked their meals with gusto.

Tom watched curiously as his old calico cat approached the table. Patches was a very loyal creature, but not noticeably friendly to strangers. He was therefore completely amazed when the feline casually jumped into the boy's lap, curled up, and began to purr. Harry smiled softly, his hand moving automatically to stroke her soft coat.

There was a brief "argument" when Hedwig took offense at the attention her master was paying the other animal, but Harry got it sorted out. Tom smiled gently. He hadn't been concerned, but if he'd had even the smallest doubt about Harry's mental state, it would have been gone now. Patches was an absolute authority on human character. If she was that content in the boy's company, he certainly had nothing to fear from Harry Potter.

When the Gryffindor finished eating he amiably followed Tom over to the guest register. He accepted Tom's handsome eagle quill, with a quiet 'thanks,' and dipped it into the inkwell. Tom waited expectantly,

then frowned when Harry froze and blanched. "Harry?" he questioned uncertainly. "Harry, lad, what's wrong?"

Jerkily, the boy turned to face the innkeeper. "What am I thinking?! I can't stay here!" he exclaimed, looking extremely wild around the eyes. "This is the first place anyone would look." Harry indicated the guest log which was openly displayed for the world to see. "All they'd have to do is check the register!"

Tom held his hands in front of him, and made little pacifying gestures in an attempt to calm the boy down. "Harry, HARRY!" he barked, when Potter's green eyes began to glaze over, and it became obvious he was considering flight. "You can't just go running off like this! Where will you go? Where will you stay?"

"I...I don't know," the boy admitted, the wind knocked from his sails. He gathered himself with visible effort, then faced Tom anxiously. "Maybe I can find a place in muggle London. See if I can get a job. Do you reckon I could leave my trunk here while I go look? Do you know if there are rules against owls? And how much do I owe you for last night?" he asked in a rush.

Tom thought quickly. The boy was obviously still distraught. All things considered, it was amazing he was thinking as clearly as he was. However, Tom had no intention of leaving the boy hero of the wizarding world to his own devices, and letting him disappear into muggle London. He eyed the boy speculatively. He was a little thing, but he had more than his share of determination and spirit. "Come with me, Harry," he said finally, grasping the boy's shoulder and steering him toward the kitchen. "I want to show you something."

Harry followed unprotesting, as Tom guided him across the kitchen, through a door, and up a narrow stairway. When they finally stopped he was in a small room above the kitchen. Harry looked around curiously. The room obviously hadn't been used in years. A thick layer of dust covered everything. It wasn't as fancy as the room he'd slept in last night, but it was comfortably furnished, and had an attached half bath.

"This was my room when I first started the old place," Tom reminisced fondly. "I added on a suite of rooms when I married, and I stay there now." He gave the boy another appraising look. "There's always more to do around here than one body can manage. If you're willing, you could stay here, and help out around the old place. You won't be a guest, so you won't sign the register. You can earn the use of this room, and any meals you care to have. If you earn more than that in a day, I can pay you, or extend you credit." Tom paused a moment, then prodded, "You'd be doing me a huge favor. What do you say?"

Harry didn't answer immediately, but Tom saw the determined gleam in his eyes. "You're the one doing me the favor," he finally stated with a grateful smile. "What do you want me to do first?"

Chapter 6 - Settling In

Thursday, July 6, 1995

After nearly a week at the Leaky Cauldron, the initial strangeness was wearing off, and Harry was beginning to get used to his odd new routine. Hopefully a better solution could be found soon, but for the time being, he was working nights, creeping cat-footed around the Leaky Cauldron after the patrons left, or retired to their rooms for the night. Currently, he was in the kitchen, putting on the kettle, preparing place settings, and doing all the little things necessary to get ready for the breakfast crowd.

A chime from the wall drew the boy's attention...the clock now read "Time to Set the Tables." The Leaky Cauldron would be opening for business soon. Another hour or so, and he'd be going back upstairs. With a dispirited little sigh, Harry grabbed some place settings, and donned his invisibility cloak, before entering the main dining area. Although he was more comfortable in the room above the kitchen than he had ever been in Dudley's second room, or the cupboard under the stairs, Harry still found himself chafing keenly under the need to sneak around and stay out of sight. Tom had cast silencing charms on his room and the back stairs and the kitchen so he didn't have to tiptoe around all the time, but it still smacked unpleasantly of the times on Privet Drive when he'd been up in his room, "making no noise, and pretending he wasn't there."

Not that he was complaining, mind. There were certainly worse things than skulking around the inn after dark, and he was grateful for the job and the room. It just got a little quiet and lonely at night, and sometimes Harry found he had a little too much time to think. He must have mulled over the events of the Third Task alone at least a thousand times.

The boy grimaced, as he quickly began laying place settings. At least there hadn't been a repeat of his behavior the first night he'd been on the job. Thank God for Tom's silencing charms. One minute he'd been busily scrubbing the kitchen floor, and the next...well, he still wasn't exactly sure what happened.

It hadn't been anything special, just an idle thought. A feeling of gratefulness that, for the moment anyway, he was safe. There were no dark wizards here. The biggest problem he had was the floor he was cleaning.

Then it had happened. Somehow his simple gratitude turned into a wave of almost hysterical relief.

If he hadn't already been on his hands and knees, Harry was pretty sure he would have fallen. His stomach clenched and his body began to shake as delayed reaction hit him hard.

At first, Harry had tried to ward off the unwelcome tide of emotion by seizing his brush, and scrubbing the floor even more vigorously than before. Physical activity had often proved useful when he needed an outlet. Flying and Quidditch were his favorites, of course, but all those stupid chores he did on Privet Drive accomplished the same thing. Harry had figuratively buried many a problem in Petunia Dursley's prized garden, but this time it didn't seem to be working. Furious with himself, he had balled his shaking hands into tight fists, clenched his teeth together, and screwed his eyes shut, determined to hold everything in. He was safe for Heaven's sake! There was no reason to be acting like this!

Years of living with the Dursleys, Dudley in particular, had conditioned Harry to internalize his feelings. A target that refused to react wasn't as much fun to torment, so he had learned to keep a neutral face, even when he was practically seething with bottled-up emotion. Only his eyes betrayed him, glinting dangerously whenever he became agitated.

Coping had been difficult at times, but Harry was optimistic and resilient by nature. He had proven himself patient and adaptable, and was usually able to roll with the punches he was dealt. Sometimes he gave in to anger or tears, but those were usually quick, quiet affairs, with no one the wiser. Occasionally, he would be aggravated enough to let his bad humor show. Harry didn't lose his temper often, usually preferring to give those who annoyed him the deep freeze treatment,

but when he did it was impressive. Sirius, Ron, and his arch rival, Draco Malfoy, could all attest to that.

That night had been more than impressive. It had been a revelation. Recent events, past events, everything seemed to catch up with him all at once. It hadn't seemed to matter if it was a life-defining moment, or something childishly trivial. A seemingly endless parade of images flashed crazily through his brain: Voldemort, his loveless childhood, Dementors, Snape's favoritism, Cedric, his parents, the stupid fights he'd had with Ron and Hermione, Sirius, Pettigrew, losing all those house points in first year, his entire second year, Minister Fudge, his cupboard, his recent abandonment...

It had finally become too much. All his outrage, anger, hatred, frustration, fear, resentment and pain boiled over, and he had no chance of holding it in.

The howl of misery he'd barely managed to stifle as Molly Weasley held him back in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing finally broke free. Harry had suddenly found himself in the middle of a heretofore unprecedented, sobbing, wailing, ranting, raving, fist-pounding, teeth-gnashing, I'm-a-nice-guy-what-did-I-ever-do-to-deserve-this outburst, that made Dudley look like an amateur.

Wincing at the memory, Harry went to fetch more silverware. Up to now, he hadn't thought himself capable of such a noise. He'd blubbered, and bellowed, and carried on for quite a little while, unable to even consider stopping until everything was worked out of his system. If this was "having a good cry," his female housemates were welcome to it. Personally, Harry found the experience sharply reminiscent of the last time he'd thrown up. A body might feel better when it was all over, but the process, and the utter loss of control left something to be desired.

Speaking of control, Harry suddenly realized, he was extremely lucky he hadn't lost control of his magic. Actually he'd been pretty lucky since his arrival late Saturday night--or was it early Sunday morning? When he and Hedwig had come downstairs with Tom to eat and check in, the Leaky Cauldron had been oddly deserted. Tom had said later that Sundays were usually slow for the entire Alley. At any rate,

no one had noticed him, and he hadn't drawn any attention when he'd cried out.

By the time he'd finished preparing the dining room, the clock read "Almost Time to Open." Harry took one last look around. The tables were set, condiment containers full, floor cleaned, chairs straight...it looked like everything was in order. There was just enough time for a quick bite and a cup of tea, then the teen gathered up his cloak, and headed back to his room.

Harry smiled ruefully, as he made his way up the stairs. Hedwig had ghosted into the kitchen about the time he'd finally begun to calm down. He'd been huddled in a little ball, still on his knees with his head pillowed on his arms, drifting in a haze of exhaustion, and still sniffing a little when she'd arrived.

The owl had landed next to him and hooted gently, concern showing clearly in her bright yellow eyes. Harry had lifted his head, and given her a wan smile, before lowering it again in shame. Hedwig continued to hoot and coo, making Harry feel bad. He knew she was worried, but how on earth could he ever explain? When he felt Hedwig nuzzling one of his hands, he automatically opened it and reached out to her, thinking she wanted to be petted. His messenger owl had other ideas, however. Harry raised an eyebrow when he felt her talon brush his palm, and... something drop into his hand.

Harry had frowned a little, as he tried to identify the object by touch alone. It was completely unfamiliar, so he had finally given up, and raised his head to look. With a thrill of horror, he realized he had a handful of dead mice. Ah. Hedwig had been out hunting.

At that particular moment, Harry had been grateful for his little crying jag, and the exhaustion it caused. It prevented him from jumping three feet in the air, and making some witty remark like, "Oh, GROSS!!" which would have deeply insulted the well-meaning bird.

He had thanked her instead, and insisted she go ahead...he wasn't hungry. She had taken all of the mice back but one, nipped his finger affectionately, and left in a flutter of feathers. Harry had stared after her for a moment, not quite knowing what to do. Hedwig might like

raw mice, but he'd never developed a taste for them. Nor did he plan to. Still, she was sharing her hard won meal with him, and it seemed almost churlish to toss it away.

Patches had shown up about that time, though, and Harry had been able to solve his dilemma, and cement their relationship by gifting her with the unfortunate rodent.

Speaking of whom...

Harry grinned at the cat, who was waiting outside his room. "Morning, Patches," he said, pausing to scratch her ears and chin before opening the door and walking in. Tom had owned cats even back when he had lived in the room over the kitchen, and there was a little flap in his door. Patches could, and did, come and go as she pleased, but in the mornings she had taken to waiting for Harry in the hall, lazily flicking her tail, and purring loudly.

Harry yawned and stretched, tired, but not ready to go to bed just yet. Instead, he looked contentedly around his new home. It was really hard to believe that this inviting space had been a stuffy, dusty, cobwebby mess just a few days ago.

Tom's old room had become a lot cheerier, and more welcoming once he'd removed the dulling layer of dust and grime. Cleaning the windows had been especially helpful in that regard. The room brightened noticeably when sunlight could pass uninhibited through the sparkling panes.

As rooms went, it was rather Spartan, with plain white walls, a wood floor, and a little fireplace that Tom said was for heating purposes only. It was larger than he had first thought too, easily as big as Dudley's main bedroom back on Privet Drive, maybe even as large as the master suite.

Harry surveyed his work with satisfaction. The first "official" job Tom had given him had been to make the room habitable. The innkeeper had shown him where things were kept, and left him to it. Seeing no reason to delay, Harry had quickly fetched some cleaning supplies and gotten right to work. To his delighted surprise, he had discovered

an attractive set of oak furniture hiding under the dust. The bedroom suite was rather masculine in appearance, with simple, classic lines, and very little ornamentation. The bed, thankfully, had been draped with a sheet to keep the mattress clean, but the dresser, desk and chair, wardrobe, bedside table, and shelving had required a vigorous scrubbing, as had the walls, bath and floor.

Tom had come back to check his progress a few hours later. He had brought fresh linens, curtains, and some miscellaneous items, and had arrived just as Harry was finishing up. The boy noted with amusement that Tom had brought some cleaning supplies with him, obviously intending to help, and had seemed surprised to find the work already done. Harry had grinned in pleased embarrassment when Tom looked around the room in open-mouthed shock, and blushed when the innkeeper jovially clapped him on the shoulder, and told him that the old place hadn't looked that good in years.

The initial cleaning had been the hard part. After that, it hadn't taken much to finish getting things in order. The addition of a few homey touches had made a big difference in the room's appeal. That and the color scheme, of course. Thanks to Tom, the bed and windows were now dressed in bright Gryffindor colors. Scarlet and gold towels graced the shelves and towel rods in the half bath as well. Harry's new red toothbrush stood in a cup by the sink, and a small gold clock sat on the bedside table. It was starting to look like Gryffindor Tower in miniature. Harry chuckled softly, and continued his fascinated perusal of the place. Even after five days he was still shocked at the sight of his own things on display.

For the first time since he'd started attending Hogwarts, Harry had completely unpacked his trunk. Even now, he questioned the wisdom of the act--if he had to leave in a hurry, there was a very real chance he might forget something--but he hadn't been able to resist having a normal room for once.

So he had compromised.

Items that could be easily replaced if things got sticky now decorated the area. His school books sat proudly on a shelf by the desk. Some of the magical objects he'd acquired over the last few years were

scattered around as well. The Pocket Sneakoscope that Ron sent him from Egypt, and the broom servicing kit from Hermione, for example, were in full view. Hedwig's cage was on the wardrobe, and homework assignments, in various stages of completeness, lay haphazardly on the desk. Harry rolled his eyes when he imagined the Dursley's reaction to all this set out for the world to see. The homework assignments alone would have probably cost him some time in the cupboard.

He hadn't left everything out, though. Practical items he'd need in an emergency (money, food, a few changes of clothes), school supplies he didn't use much in the summer (his cauldron, for instance), and a few items he couldn't bear to lose (like the precious photo album Hagrid had given him, the Invisibility Cloak that had been his father's, and his Firebolt) had been carefully re-packed. Just in case. Harry thought, as he folded his cloak, and put it away.

By the time Harry finished showering, brushing his teeth, and pulling on his pajamas, the sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon. He'd discovered that falling asleep was easier before the sun rose too high, so he quickly dealt with Hedwig's cage, and set out fresh water and owl treats before climbing wearily into bed. That was another good thing about the new living arrangements, the boy thought, settling comfortably under the covers. Hedwig was much happier. She enjoyed being able to come and go as she pleased enormously. Harry smiled softly as his eyes drifted shut. This wasn't so bad, really. Even if having your days and nights flipped was extremely weird...

Tom shook his head in bemusement when he entered the kitchen. He still couldn't believe how well things had worked out.

The offer of work, and his old room had been a spur-of-the-moment inspiration. An attempt to keep the boy safely accounted for, without injuring his pride. He wasn't losing money on the room, by letting Harry stay there, after all. The boy could have stayed there for free as far as Tom was concerned, and the Leaky Cauldron could easily absorb the cost of meals for one, but something had told him that Harry wouldn't accept that.

Still, Potter was very young. Tom hadn't thought he could have much in the way of skills for that reason alone. He knew from past dealings with the boy that Harry was quiet and well mannered, but like most of the wizarding community, he'd assumed that Harry's home life was relatively easy. Harry had been immediately hidden in the muggle world after his parents' deaths. Until his re-introduction to the wizarding world almost four years ago, almost nothing had been known about where he was, and how he fared. On very rare occasions, there would be a "Boy-Who-Lived Sighting" in the Daily Prophet. Sometimes these reports would be accompanied by a distant, indistinct photograph, but on the whole, Harry Potter was an intriguing mystery.

Tom wondered if Harry knew what he meant to the wizarding world. Probably not. The innkeeper smiled fondly as he remembered Hagrid bringing Harry to the Leaky Cauldron, and the boy's bewildered surprise at his reception. He had thought at the time that Harry must have been sheltered by his muggle relations. Or perhaps they didn't know themselves. How could muggles articulate those horrible years when You-Know-Who had been at full power? It was hard, even for those who lived through it to describe the turmoil, confusion and utter fear that the Death Eaters' terror-campaign had wrought. When Harry had somehow survived the Killing Curse, and destroyed You-Know-Who's power in the bargain, it had been exhilarating...like the first rays of sunshine after a particularly wild and brutal storm.

Tom did a cursory check of the dining area, before walking into the kitchen. This must be what having a house elf is like, he thought dazedly. Everything was ready for the breakfast rush. Tom chuckled at the irony. No skills indeed! Harry's stay was turning into a vacation for him. He'd thought he was doing a favor--extending a little harmless charity. He'd expected to have to teach the teen what he needed to know. When he'd gone to check Harry's progress the first day, he'd imagined the boy struggling ineptly with the mess, and had been prepared to breeze in and take over. Instead he had gained an efficient, conscientious, employee.

He checked his ingredient canisters, and found them full. All he had to do was make sure the charms that kept the food fresh didn't need replacing. Tom looked around bemusedly. It was ridiculous.

Impossible. The boy wasn't even fifteen yet, and he had the domestic skills of a seasoned housewife. At this rate, Harry Potter was going to earn the right to stay at the Caldron free of charge for the rest of his life. Especially after that list fiasco...

Tom sighed, as he remembered the mistake. He'd written a list of tasks that needed doing, and given it to Harry as a guide. He'd meant for the jobs to be completed over the next few days, but he'd evidently forgotten to tell Harry that. He'd been amazed the next morning when he'd come down and found everything done!

At first he'd assumed that Harry had misunderstood, and used his wand. He was composing a "you know you're not supposed to do magic out of school" speech to deliver later, when he'd entered the kitchen and found Harry asleep at the table. He'd evidently nodded off while waiting for his tea to steep. One look at the exhausted boy, and Tom had known he hadn't used magic. The red, irritated skin of his hands was mute testimony to that. He still couldn't believe it. There had been twenty-five jobs on that list. Harry must have zipped around like a scalded cat to get it all done in one night.

The boy had seemed embarrassed, but had just shrugged a little when Tom had asked why thought he had to do the whole list at once. He did that a lot, Tom noted. Especially when his muggle family came up in conversation.

Tom stood in the door between the kitchen and the dining area and looked around, honestly impressed. Harry was obviously putting in some serious hours. He thought he had cleared up the misunderstanding, but perhaps he should lay out a work schedule as well. There was no need for the boy to earn the entire summer's worth of room and board in one week, after all. To be fair, he hadn't told the boy in so many words what he expected in return for the room and food, nor had they discussed precise wages. Harry was such an appreciative little thing, it was possible, even highly likely, that he thought the ridiculous amount of effort he was expending was an even trade. Tom rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He'd go talk to Harry later, and sort things out. Perhaps he could convince the boy to write to Dumbledore as well.

A chime from the wall caught his attention. The wall clock now read, "You're Late." Tom muttered a mild oath and hurried over to unlock the doors. Harry Potter was a puzzle that would have to wait for now.

A small group of his fellow Diagon Alley proprietors were outside the door, waiting for him to open up. Tom apologized for the delay, and ushered them in.

"Blimey, Tom," Florean Fortescue commented, looking around appreciatively. "The old place is looking great! Have you given up eating and sleeping?"

Tom smiled his toothless grin, pleased they'd noticed. It had been subtle at first, but after several nights of work, Harry's efforts were beginning to show. Tom kept the Leaky Cauldron respectably clean, of course, but couldn't always find the time to give the old place the attention it deserved. "No, indeed, Florean," he replied jovially. "I've hired myself a hand for the summer. Hogwarts student. He's a very hard worker, I must say."

"Indeed? I may have to try and steal him," the manager of Flourish and Blotts joked. "He can organize my back room. How much are you paying him, Tom?"

"Yes, Tom," Madam Malkin joined in, smiling coyly, "you know how hard it is to find good help."

Tom frowned thoughtfully. He'd been trying to figure out a way to get Harry out of the Leaky Cauldron. The night schedule had actually started by accident, because Harry's sleep pattern had been disrupted. Having the boy work nights was a good idea, and it almost ensured that the boy remained unseen, but Tom felt bad about it. Harry hadn't complained, but the solitary lifestyle he'd been leading couldn't be good for him. He looked better than he had that first night, but still seemed a bit down. Getting out might cheer him up.

"I can see if the lad would be interested in doing some extra work for you if you'd like," he finally said. "He might like the chance to earn his

school supplies, but he's been working nights. Even if he agrees, he'll need some time to sort himself out, mind."

"Tom, we were just having you on," Florean began, but Tom shook his head firmly.

"No, really. I wasn't expecting him to be so quick." Tom made a sweeping gesture that included the dining area and bar. "I'm going to run out of extra things for him to do." Tom grimaced a little, before continuing, "He's already working on his summer assignments, and I daresay he's finished one or two." He paused a moment wondering how much to say. "He had a nasty shock a few days ago, and seems happier when he keeps busy."

"Well, we'd need to meet him first," the manager of Flourish and Blotts pointed out practically. "Assuming the boy says yes of course. What's his name, anyway?"

This wasn't a question Tom was prepared to answer, so he stalled for time by refilling teacups, and asking after everyone. Telling them the boy in question was the Boy Who Lived probably wasn't wise just yet, but he couldn't delay forever. Admitting the boy's name was Harry wasn't a good idea either. Harry was a common enough name, but it might be too obvious. What's his middle name again? Tom thought frantically. James. Not bad, that. Rather formal, though, and it still might tip people off, as much as the lad favors his father. What's short for James? Jamesey? Jamie? Jim? They were waiting for an answer. What the hell... Tom faced his colleagues and smiled apologetically. "Sorry. My mind wandered a moment. The boy's called Jim."

About four that afternoon, Harry woke to the sensation of needles sticking in his chin. Blearily he opened his eyes, and scowled at Patches. The cat was sitting on his chest, and had a forepaw resting delicately on his face. Every so often, she would extend her claws slightly, just enough to irritate, but not enough to break his skin. "I'm going to plug up that hole in my door," he grumbled. He'd been woken several times by nightmares--daymares?--and still felt groggy and irritable.

The cat ignored his bad humor, and began to casually wash her face. Gradually, the Gryffindor felt his spirits lighten as he listened to her rumbling purr, and gently scratched behind her ears. She really is a brilliant alarm clock, Harry thought, and never the same way two days in a row! Sometimes she did the claw thing, other days she would purr in his ear or lick his face. His personal favorite was the way she had sent him scurrying to the loo after deliberately treading on his lower stomach.

After a while Patches walked away, swishing her tail regally. Harry sat up, reached for his glasses, and wondered absently if Hermione had to put up with this sort of thing from her ginger cat, Crookshanks. Shrugging, the boy walked to the wardrobe, and took out some fresh clothes. When all this sneaking around is over, I'll have to ask.

The boy smiled fondly as he caught his reflection in the mirror on the dresser while walking to the bathroom. Before now, he hadn't really given a lot of thought to the mechanics behind enchanted mirrors. He had reckoned there was one personality per mirror, and that the personality was essentially trapped in one place.

This wasn't the case at the Leaky Cauldron, however. The mirror personalities could share frames if they so desired, and often went "visiting" much like the portraits at Hogwarts. Harry hadn't noticed this before, because he hadn't been alone in his room a lot on previous visits. Plus, he was still relatively new to the wizarding world, and it hadn't occurred to him to talk to the mirror.

Harry had become aware of this phenomenon when he had dusted and polished the mirror on the dresser. Almost as soon as he'd started wiping, curious presences had crowded in, wondering what was going on, and asking if Harry was going to be staying here now. Evidently, no one regularly inhabited Tom's old room. Up to now, the frame was used as a place to be alone when one of the personalities wanted to think...or sulk.

Tom also used the mirrors as an informal communication system of sorts. Crystal, who had initially greeted Harry his first morning at the Leaky Cauldron, had left almost immediately in search of Tom. Harry

found out later that was how Tom knew he was up and dressed. She had sought the boy out that evening, and apologized contritely for leaving so abruptly. Tom had begun to worry when Harry had shown no sign of waking after sleeping nearly fourteen hours straight. He'd asked the mirrors to keep watch, and notify him immediately when the boy stirred.

All in all, Harry liked the mirror, and the personalities it housed. His new status as "employee" rather than "guest" made them more open with him, and the steady stream of visitors kept him from feeling completely isolated--especially when Hedwig was out flying or hunting. They were all extremely courteous, always asking permission before "popping in," so to speak, and seeming to understand when Harry wasn't up to company at the moment. By mutual agreement, the mirror on the medicine cabinet in the bathroom was off limits except for emergencies, so Harry tended to change clothes in there.

"Good Morning, Lovey! Are you decent?"

Speak of the devil... Harry finished pulling his shirt over his head, grinned again, and walked to the dresser. "Hi, Crystal, and yes."

"Good," the mirror said. A very transparent outline of the entity called Crystal appeared, so faint it was hardly noticeable. She seemed to settle in and make herself comfortable. "You and I are going to have a discussion about your appearance."

Harry rolled his eyes, and crossed his arms. This was threatening to become a daily ritual. "Jeez, Crystal, not this again!"

Before the mirror could answer, there was a sharp rap on the door. "Harry, lad, are you awake?" Tom's voice called from the hall.

Harry quickly opened the door, and grinned sheepishly at his boss. "Hi, Tom. Afraid I just got up," he said, running his fingers through his hair.

"Tom!" Crystal squealed delightedly from the dresser. "Get in here and help me! Maybe he'll listen to you."

Tom grinned, and Harry rolled his eyes. Other outlines began appearing in Harry's mirror to see what the row was about. "I seem to be interrupting something," Tom said, highly amused.

"Not really," Harry nodded casually at the mirror. "Crystal here doesn't approve of my look," he told Tom with a sweeping gesture that took in his clothing, glasses, and hair. He shrugged then continued lightly, "She reckons I'd look better blind, bald, and starkers."

This dry comment was delivered so matter-of-factly, it took Tom and all the mirror entities a few seconds to process what Harry said. When they did, the room was filled with hearty guffaws, and Crystal's outraged sputtering.

"Come over here, Harry," she commanded. Harry arched an eyebrow, and moved to stand in front of the mirror. "Hold still," Crystal said. Harry watched in fascination as his reflection doubled. The second reflection was curiously static, like a muggle photograph. Wow. This was new.

"Now look here," Crystal continued, pointing to Harry's static image. "If we get rid of these..."

Harry's glasses disappeared.

"And replace them with these..."

Smaller, wireframe glasses appeared.

"And make these fit properly..."

Harry's clothes shrank.

"No, no," another mirror personality named Amethyst interrupted. "He needs to wear this."

Photo Harry was now sporting emerald green dress robes.

And so it went. As Harry and Tom watched, about a dozen personalities with about a dozen different opinions and tastes manipulated the image. They played with different hairstyles, glasses frames, and clothing. Harry was dressed in everything from velvet dress robes to punk leather.

Tom found himself nodding enthusiastically. Why didn't he see it? He'd almost convinced himself not to trouble Harry with the proposition from the other merchants of Diagon Alley, not seeing how the boy could go out without being recognized, but this could work!

As ashamed as he was to admit it, Tom had never looked at Harry before. After you saw the shock of dark hair, and verified the identity with the green eyes and lightning scar, the rest didn't seem to matter. He'd never noticed before, but Harry's muggle clothing was very worn, and overlarge. Why on earth was he given such ill-fitting garments? Tom gave himself a mental shake, unwanted suspicions beginning to form in his mind. He'd sort that out later. The fact remained that for whatever reason, everything Harry owned was ill-fitting, unflattering, or both--designed to detract from rather than enhance his looks. Plus the fact that before the TriWizard Tournament there hadn't been very many pictures of Harry available. A good many witches and wizards probably only knew his physical description. "Yes," he murmured thoughtfully, "it just might work."

"Sorry Tom, but no. It just isn't me."

"What?" Tom looked up and laughed out loud. Saber, one of the more, erm, adventurous personalities had photo Harry dressed in tight black leather, with a green spiked Mohawk, a black butch collar, and multiple piercings.

"See anything you fancy, Harry?" Crystal sang merrily. "How do you want to look?"

What the heck... Harry decided to play a little. It was his face, after all, and they'd certainly been having a fine time with it. "Put up the other one," Harry said, speculatively. "The one with plain jeans, and the collared t-shirt. Okay. Now I don't fancy letting someone poke holes

in me, so get rid of those. Thanks. A more normal hairstyle, please and no glasses."

The image shifted obediently, following his directions. Intrigued in spite of himself, Harry inspected his reflection in the mirror. The Dursleys had always told him he was hopelessly ugly, and his hair always seemed to do as it pleased. He knew he was skinny and short, and nothing to write home about, really, but Harry was getting to the age where looks and the opposite sex were becoming more important. Perhaps it was possible to improve. After all, no one wants to be unattractive. He examined the image critically, then turned to look questioningly at Tom. "What do you think?"

"Impressive, Harry," Tom said, not quite believing the difference. "That reminds me, I had a conversation this morning you might find interesting, and I wanted to discuss your work schedule as well."

Harry listened while Tom explained, then looked at the reflection again. It might work...except for one tiny detail. "Sounds good, Tom, but what about this?" he asked, tapping his scar.

"Let me think on that, lad," Tom said, frowning. "There are different ways to go, you know. Glamours, Concealing Charms, Potions..." Tom trailed off, still thinking hard. "They all have advantages and disadvantages. We'll figure something out. In the meantime, you'll probably be safer doing your shopping in muggle London. Less risk of you being recognized." Tom turned to leave, then paused at the door. "Oh, and Harry, since you don't have to work as many hours as you thought, try to get back to a night time sleeping schedule, and you might want to write that letter to Professor Dumbledore, as well."

Harry nodded as Tom left, then watched as the shadowy presences bade him goodbye, and popped out. Once again alone in his room, he sat down at the desk and began to plan.

He supposed he could go to Gringott's first thing in the morning, before lots of shoppers arrived at Diagon Alley. While he was there, he could make the inquiries about his vault, and exchange some of his wizard gold to muggle money. Trouble was, he wasn't sure what to do or where to go after that. Harry had lived most of his life in

Surrey, but his visits to the city had been rare. In fact, the first time he'd set foot in London was when Hagrid took him to Diagon Alley summer before First Year.

Harry absently picked up a quill and twirled it between his thumb and index finger as he considered this, then decided things would probably go better if he had a little help. But who to ask? Harry bit his lip again, then smiled when his eyes fell on the smudged and wrinkled business card he'd rescued from his shirt pocket when he'd unpacked his trunk. Well, she did say to call if I needed anything, Harry mused, picking up Dr. Granger's business card, and looking at it speculatively. If nothing else, maybe they can recommend a store.

Chapter 7 - Letters

Thursday, July 6, 1995

Hermione Granger sat at the desk in her room, working on her Charm essay. She smiled as she thought of Harry and Ron, and their likely reactions to her current activity. Harry would probably raise an eyebrow at her, maybe even roll his eyes, before smiling and shaking his head in gentle exasperation. Ron, the more vocal of the two, would probably natter on nonstop about how this was the summer holidays, and she was "mental" for doing homework already.

Hermione wrinkled her nose in annoyance. Didn't those two know that it was better to get the work out of the way early, while the information was still fresh?

Deciding it was time for a break, the girl stood and stretched, arching her back, and raising her arms above her head. Next term at Hogwarts they would be taking their O.W.L.s -- Ordinary Wizing Levels. Perhaps she should start looking over her old materials now.

Hermione frowned a little and twisted her mouth to one side. She wondered if she could convince Ron and Harry to do the same. Her best friends were not stupid, not at all, but both of them did tend to procrastinate so! She had lost track over the years of how many times she had sat up late with them in the Gryffindor Common Room while they rushed to finish one thing or another.

Assignments, she might add, that they would have had plenty of time to finish if they'd just started at a reasonable time. It really was amazing their marks were as good as they were.

Dismissing the matter for now, Hermione walked over to her window and looked out, admiring her mother's neat garden. She loved attending Hogwarts, and she was very glad that she was learning magic, but it felt absolutely glorious to be home for a while. Things felt relaxed and normal--she could almost forget the threat of You-Know-Who.

Smiling for no reason in particular, and feeling very lucky indeed, Hermione sighed contentedly. Her parents always showered her with love and attention during the summer. They went on lovely trips and adventures--her father was taking her on an outing tomorrow--and, on the whole, her parents had learned to take the whole magic issue in stride. Well, mostly, anyway.

They hadn't been very keen on her traveling to Bulgaria alone, the young witch reflected with a wry smile, but instead of laying down an ultimatum, they had offered a compromise. If she wanted to take Victor Krum up on his invitation to visit she could, but one or both of them would accompany her. Bulgaria could be their vacation destination this year if she so chose.

Hermione knew she needed to make a decision, but truly she found herself not particularly caring if she went anywhere this year. That was part of the reason she had already started her summer homework. For the first time in a while, maybe ever, she found herself desiring a little down time--especially after the stress and excitement of this past year. She had worked almost as hard as Harry had for the TriWizard Tournament.

Hermione shuddered delicately. If she was feeling stressed, she didn't even want to think about what Harry must be going through. She hoped Professor Dumbledore would let him go to the Burrow soon. Or even here to my home. He, more than anyone needed a little tender loving care--and he wasn't likely to get it from the Dursleys.

Crookshanks was rubbing against her ankles, purring, and wanting attention. Hermione obligingly scooped him up, and scratched his ears, wearing a pensive expression. She still remembered this first time she had seen Vernon Dursley. She, Harry, and Ron had just arrived at platform 9^¾ after their first year at Hogwarts. He had barely spoken a civil word to Harry, and couldn't be bothered to meet his new friends, or their parents. He had been so horribly unpleasant, Hermione had been shocked.

Still, before this year Harry's uncle had at least been on time. Hermione had to assume Harry had made it home okay, as hadn't

heard from him yet. Ron either for that matter. That's the only bad thing about the summer holidays, Hermione mused. Since I don't have an owl of my own, I have to wait for Ron or Harry to write first. Usually that wasn't a problem, but this summer, she found herself seeking reassurance. She glanced at her calendar, and shook her head impatiently. July 6. She hadn't even been home a full week yet.

The sun was sitting low in the sky, casting the long shadows of late afternoon over the yard. Hermione deposited Crookshanks on her bed, and flopped down beside him. It wasn't quite time for dinner, so she closed her eyes and just soaked in the familiar comfort of her childhood room.

Tap-tap-tap.

"Come in," the girl answered absently. No one entered, and the tapping repeated itself. Hermione opened a confused brown eye, and looked for the source of the knocking. A delighted smile spread over her face as she glanced at the window. "Hedwig!"

Hermione bounded over to the window, and let the snowy owl in. "Hello, girl," she grinned, stroking her brilliant white plumage. Hedwig, she was amused to see, was loaded down with correspondence. She had a letter tied to each leg, and one in her beak. She dropped the one in her beak into Hermione's hand, nipped her affectionately, then flew back out the window before the startled witch could even offer her some water.

Hermione watched as she disappeared in the distance, puzzled by her behavior. Harry knew she didn't have an owl, and usually instructed Hedwig to stay while she responded. Oh, well. Hermione shrugged, and eagerly tore open her letter. Maybe he said something inside.

6 July 1995

Dear Hermione,

How are you? I hope your summer is going well. Things here are okay. I thought I was going to spend the holidays dying of boredom,

but guess what? I have a summer job. It's nothing fancy, mind, but it doesn't matter. Almost anything is better than being cooped up in Uncle Vernon's house.

So, what are your big plans for the summer? Are you going to be able to go on holiday with your parents? I reckon I'll be sticking pretty close...recent events and all. Whatever you do, have fun, but be careful!

Well, that's all my news. Hedwig has a couple more messages to deliver, so I asked her to stop by your place on her way back, if you want to write back.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Harry

P.S. I've finished my Transfiguration assignment, and my Charms essay. Surprise!

When Hermione read the post script of Harry's letter, her mouth dropped open in shock, before breaking into a happy smile. Well, he sounds okay, Hermione thought. Her eyes skipped over the lines again. Be careful indeed! Who do you think you're talking to, Mr. Accident-Waiting-To-Happen! Hermione giggled lightly, and laid the letter on her desk. Hedwig probably wouldn't be back for a few days. Unless Ron's owl, Pig, showed up, she had plenty of time to write a reply. In the meantime, she'd better get cracking on that Charms essay...it just wouldn't do for Harry to finish his summer homework before she did!

Friday, July 7, 1995

Molly Weasley looked up from cooking breakfast, and smiled at the snowy owl who was tapping on her kitchen window. "Hedwig!" she greeted warmly, letting the owl in, and fetching some food and water. Hedwig hooted gratefully, and delicately sipped the water. "Ron!" Molly yelled up the stairs.

"I'm coming, Mum!" Ron's slightly irritated reply floated down the stairs. She had only just called them all down to breakfast a few minutes ago.

"Don't take that tone with me, young man," his mother replied, a hint of warning in her voice. "Hedwig is here. I thought you'd like to know."

Oh. Ron thought, abashed. "Sorry, Mum," he called while he searched through the clothes scattered around his room for a clean shirt. "Be right there."

By the time Ron made it downstairs, the table was full, and Hedwig had finished her refreshments. She hooted a greeting, and held out her left leg when the boy approached her. "Hey, Hedwig," Ron said, as he untied the letter. "How's life with the muggles?" The snowy owl blinked noncommentally while he opened his letter and began to read.

6 July 1995

Dear Ron,

Hi, mate! Hope you're enjoying the holiday. Tell your mum that the charms she put on Hedwig's cage and my trunk were absolutely brilliant! I'm quite sure I wouldn't have managed half as well without them.

I'm doing okay. I sort of had to get a summer job, so that's taken some getting used to. It's good though. I'm not stuck in Uncle Vernon's house all day, and to tell the truth, keeping busy is helping. I'm so desperate, I've even started my summer assignments. Pathetic, really.

Well, that's my news. Tell everyone hello for me, and write back soon!

Harry

"What did Harry say, son?" Arthur Weasley asked as Ron slid up to the table, and began to fill his plate. Ron obligingly read the short

note aloud. When he was finished, his parents looked at each other in disbelief.

"He has a job?" Molly said, stunned. "Is that safe? I thought he wasn't supposed to leave his aunt and uncle's." Her expression darkened. "If he can work, why can't he come to the Burrow?"

The Weasley children looked at each other and shrugged.

"Molly, we can't trap Harry in that house all summer," Arthur said reasonably. "Besides, there's a world of difference between him leaving for a few hours to work, and his leaving the property entirely, and until the warding is completed on the Burrow..."

"Yes, I know," Molly sighed. "We have to protect the Burrow for our sakes as well as Harry's." She met her husband's gaze with determination. "So we'll carry on tonight, then?"

"Yes. As soon as I get off work." Arthur drained his tea, and gave his wife a peck on the cheek.

Ron watched as his father and Percy, his older brother, flooed to his job at the ministry. During the day, things were almost normal. The Burrow was as cheerfully chaotic as ever. Evenings were another story, though. In the evenings, his parents, and his three oldest brothers struggled to weave a complex web of magical protection around the Burrow. It was a maddening dichotomy. One that Ron found horribly frustrating. It was murder being an underage student. He wanted to help!

For perhaps the first time in his life, Ron understood the concept of being involved in something larger than he was. His safe, anonymous and relatively obscure life had been snatched away. He grimaced slightly when he thought of all the times he'd complained about, or felt overshadowed by his family. Right now they were the only thing he felt he could depend on. How on earth did Harry cope, living with those muggle relatives of his?

Hedwig had been resting on Errol's perch over in the corner. She flew around the kitchen, hooting happily, before flying out the window again. Ron smiled as he watched her until she was out of sight, then went off to find some parchment and a quill. He had a couple of letters to write.

Sunday, July 9, 1995

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Order of Merlin First Class recipient, Grand Sorcerer, Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, and International Confederation of Wizards member sat in his office, going through his owls. Piled on the desk in front of him, were letters from concerned parents, howlers from angry parents, regular correspondence, and reports from the Order members who were in the field.

Albus sighed, and reached for the distinctive red envelopes. Best to get those out of the way first. In all likelihood, they probably weren't going to contain any useful information, but one never knew. He'd certainly been surprised in the past.

Fawkes blinked awake, and glared balefully at the headmaster as frightened shouting filled the office. Almost all of the howlers were from parents. Dumbledore noted with wry amusement that most of them were more upset about their children being taught to call Voldemort by name than they were about the monster's return. He really hoped something could be done about that "You-Know-Who" nonsense. At least he hadn't gotten one from Molly Weasley. Yet. He had gotten a couple of impassioned letters, though. Persistent, that woman. Like a determined little terrier with a bone in her teeth.

To his surprise, the last howler was from the esteemed Minister of Magic. Albus allowed himself a small chuckle. If he had seven howlers on his desk, Fudge and the rest of the bureaucrats surely had their hands full. Perhaps I should send them some earplugs, Albus smirked as he ripped open the last howler. Immediately the unctious tones of the Minister of Magic rang out.

"ALBUS, YOU IDIOT!! I THOUGHT YOU KNEW BETTER THAN TO TELL UNCORROBORATED RUMORS, AND SPREAD PANIC! I'VE ALWAYS SUPPORTED YOU AND GIVEN YOU A FREE HAND IN THE RUNNING OF THAT SCHOOL, BUT I'M WARNING YOU-- THERE ARE LIMITS! EVEN YOU CAN'T BE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO BLINDLY TAKE THE WORD OF A FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD BOY--I DON'T CARE WHO HE IS!"

Cornelius paused here, obviously getting his breath back, then he continued in a more threatening tone, "IF YOU PULL ANOTHER STUNT LIKE THIS I'LL BE FORCED TO TAKE THE MATTER UP WITH THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS! YOU'LL BE OUT OF THAT SCHOOL SO FAST YOU WON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED...!"

When Fudge began to repeat himself, Albus shook his head irritably and silenced the howler by sending it flying to the fireplace with a banishing charm. He'd hoped to have the full backing of the ministry. Fudge's hard-headedness was going to make things more difficult.

Albus pushed his half-moon glasses up on his head, and passed a weary hand over his eyes. Nothing was going the way it should. The construction of wards and protective spells around the Burrow was nowhere near finished. When he'd essentially promised Harry that he could travel to the Burrow later in the summer, he'd hoped that Cornelius would allow some Aurors to assist. Fudge had flatly refused, though, saying the his Aurors had more important things to do than to cater to the whims of a spoiled child. Arthur and Molly were doing what they could, usually in the evenings, struggling with the unfamiliar spells, and even going as far as to recruit their older sons to help. Albus himself was helping as much as his schedule allowed, but progress was frustratingly slow. Warding of this magnitude was usually done by an experienced team.

Dumbledore replaced his glasses, and reached for the rest of his mail. At times like this he found himself wishing dearly that none of this was necessary. The old magic he had been able to use when enclosing Privet Drive had made things far easier. That spell, and a few wards to alert Arabella of any witch or wizard in the area, was all that was necessary to ensure Harry's safety from magical attack. The blood-magic spell was difficult, but compared to the complicated web

being woven around the Burrow, it was nothing. Albus wished they had the luxury of simply invoking that spell again, but as much as they loved him, the Weasleys were not Harry's blood relatives.

Still, the headmaster found himself in awe of their loyalty, dedication and persistence. It certainly would be easier to send Harry a note of apology, telling him that things weren't working out as planned, and that he couldn't come and stay after all. Albus grimaced, imagining the howler Molly would send if he suggested that.

On the bright side, this only had to be done once. Once the wards and protective magic were in place, Harry could travel to the Burrow anytime they cared to invite him. Obviously, the Weasleys weren't planning on abandoning the boy now that things were beginning to heat up, but there seemed to be more to it.

Ron, especially, was eager for the shielding to be completed, and Albus got the feeling it wasn't just because he and his siblings wanted Harry to come play backyard Quidditch. It was almost as if they thought Harry was somehow unsafe at his uncle's house.

That was nonsense, of course. The boy had the best magical protection available, and the reports on file at the Ministry always stated that he was being adequately cared for. Albus frowned a little. He had found it odd when Harry had come to him in his second year, and requested permission to stay at Hogwarts during the summer, but had dismissed it as a passing whim, probably the result of some now-forgotten row with his relatives. Besides, Harry was an intelligent lad. If things were not right at home, he would tell someone.

Or would he?

Dumbledore's frown deepened. Harry did have an alarming habit of trying to work things out himself. Proud, and fiercely independent, the boy seemed determined to prove himself, only asking for help when absolutely necessary. Albus smiled, and shook his head fondly. Even Harry's friends found this maddening at times.

In his many years as headmaster, Albus had become good at identifying different personality types. People who showed the traits

Harry exhibited generally came from environments where their guardians had encouraged them to be creative independent thinkers, and shored up their confidence and feelings of self worth.

Generally. Unfortunately, that wasn't always the case. Sometimes, those same qualities showed up in children who had been belittled, or neglected. Staunch, persistent little souls, they somehow seemed to sense that they had worth, no matter what was said, and were determined to show the world that they had merit. Surely Harry didn't fall in the latter category...or did he? It would certainly explain his almost instinctive mistrust of authority figures.

Albus prided himself on his ability to put students at ease, and gain their trust, but getting the boy to open up had proven uncommonly difficult. Although, to be fair, Harry had come to see the headmaster this past year when he'd had a vision in Divination. It was possible he was finally earning the boy's trust.

Dumbledore steeped his fingers thoughtfully. Perhaps he should look further into the matter, and question the Weasleys. It was possible, however unlikely, that something had been missed.

A muffled ping caught his attention, and the top sheet of a stack of parchment marked "Mrs. A. Figg" began filling with writing. Arabella was reporting from the United States. Agents were sent into the field with a charmed piece of parchment, and a special quill. To report, they simply wrote what they wanted to say. The message was transferred from their parchment, and appeared on the corresponding piece in his office. It was one of Professor Flitwick's more ingenious inventions--faster than owls, and virtually untraceable. Albus read along as she wrote, and smiled a bit. Her mission was actually going fairly well, all things considered, but she had run into a few delays, and the parchment fairly crackled with her frustration.

The headmaster picked up Arabella's report and filed it with the others. Black and Lupin were doing well, as were Moody and Fletcher. With any luck, they would all be back in time for the next scheduled meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. Currently the field agents were warning International Confederation of Wizards members about

current events, and sniffing around for indications of dark activity abroad while they were at it.

Albus looked up sharply when a snowy owl flew in his open window. Ah, there's no rest for the weary, he thought, as he removed the letter she had tied to her leg. Well, speak of the devil, he grinned when he opened the letter and glanced at the signature. It was from Harry.

6 July 1995

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I hope you're enjoying your holiday. Sorry to disturb you, but a couple of things have happened that I thought you might like to know.

The first thing is, I have a summer job. I know you wanted me to keep close to Privet Drive, but my relatives didn't exactly give me a choice. I don't mind, though. Staying busy helps keep my mind off... Harry seemed to pause here, and tap his quill against the parchment, before deciding on ...things.

Harry had skipped down to begin a new paragraph, and had tapped on the parchment with his quill some more. Dumbledore could almost picture him, frowning, and worrying his lower lip between his teeth as he struggled to properly phrase what he wanted to say.

The job isn't really what I'm writing about, the letter finally continued, it's...well, sir, I think my link with Voldemort has...changed since the TriWizard Tournament. I think it's stronger.

Albus frowned worriedly. This didn't sound good, but at the same time he was overwhelmingly grateful that Harry had decided to volunteer the information now, instead of waiting until after the fact as he had done so often in the past. The whole tone of the letter had changed. Harry was clearly reluctant and tense, unsure about what reaction his news was going to elicit.

It started a couple of days before the end of term, Harry reported. I kept hearing voices. It was like listening to whispers, or a conversation that was too far away to hear properly. It doesn't

happen all the time, and I didn't really notice it at first, because of all the babble at Hogwarts, on the Hogwarts Express, and in King's Cross. I thought I was just hearing people around me.

A couple of nights ago, I was up quite late. There was no one around but me--everyone else was sleeping. I heard the voices more clearly that time. Voldemort was angry because of some delay in the brewing of a memory potion. He wants to use it on Peter Pettigrew for some reason. I tried to hold on to the connection, but I lost it before he said why. I hope this information is of some use to you. Sorry it isn't more.

I have enclosed a letter for Professor Lupin and Snuffles. If it isn't too much trouble, could you make sure they get it? Thanks in advance.

Yours Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Albus re-read the next to last paragraph twice, utterly convinced the phenomenon was genuine. For the first time in days, his eyes twinkled merrily, and a smile graced his features as he considered this new information source. There was no way Harry could have known about Severus' memory potion, or how he had "unfortunately" run out of a key ingredient that had to be special ordered. Dumbledore frowned a bit when he remembered something. Harry hadn't mentioned his scar hurting, but the boy tended to be stubbornly closed-mouthed about such things. Perhaps he should ask.

Laying Harry's letter aside for the moment, Albus picked up the envelope addressed to Lupin and Black. He felt odd, opening their letter, but the charmed parchment was the most efficient way of sending correspondence. Besides, it would be a nice treat for the two Marauders. They had been looking unusually grim lately.

Fetching his wand, Dumbledore cast Flitwick's charm on the letter, and laid it on top of Sirius and Remus' stack of parchment. When he activated the charms on the paper, he watched as Harry's message was soaked into the parchment, and disappeared.

That done, the old wizard began to plan. With Harry all the way down in Surrey, owling would never do. It was too slow, too risky, and Hedwig was too recognizable. He would send Harry an agent's field pack. He wanted any information on Voldemort as soon as it was available. The first order of business was to reassure Harry, so that the boy wouldn't be afraid to report what he heard...or saw for that matter. Dumbledore frowned. Harry hadn't mentioned having any visions, but Voldemort had been fairly quiet since his resurrection. Perhaps he simply hadn't had any. Yet. Picking up his favorite quill, Albus reached for a clean sheet of parchment, and began to write.

Ping! The attention signal went off on Remus and Sirius' charmed parchment. They were currently staking out a promising site for possible Death Eater activity. Remus had just started his shift, and Sirius was stretched out on the bed, already asleep.

Remus idly lowered his binoculars, and looked at the parchment, to determine if it was something worth waking Sirius over. His jaw nearly hit the floor, when he read Dumbledore's quick note of explanation:

Remus and Sirius,

Mr. Potter has contacted me with a request to forward this letter to you. Do not worry, nothing seems to be amiss.

Albus Dumbledore

Remus glanced over the letter, torn. On one hand, Harry's letter was rather innocuous. On the other hand, it was a letter from Harry, and Sirius would want to know immediately. Signing, he shook Sirius' shoulder. "Padfoot?"

"Mmm...?"

"Paddy, wake up!" Remus said, shaking harder. Some things never changed.

"G'way, Moony..."

"Okay, have it your way. You can read Harry's letter later."

"...'kay." Sirius rolled over.

Remus Lupin examined his fingernails, and counted backwards from ten. When he got to five, Sirius' ice-blue eyes popped open. "What?" he asked blearily. "Harry?"

"Harry. You remember, don't you? Nice kid, about so high," Remus held his hand up. "Black hair? Green eyes? Glasses?"

Sirius scowled irritably. "I know what he looks like, Moony. What about him?"

Remus held the parchment between his thumb and forefinger, and dangled it in front of Sirius' face. "He sent us a letter. Or more precisely he sent it to Dumbledore, and he sent it to us."

Sirius sat up immediately, and snatched the letter out of his friend's hand. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"I did say so in the first place."

Sirius waved a dismissive hand at Remus, and returned his attention to Harry's letter.

6 July 1995

Dear Professor Lupin and Snuffles,

I don't know when this letter is going to get to you, but I thought I'd write anyway. Things are okay here. I've been working on my assignments, and have a summer job, so I'm keeping busy.

I hope things are going well for you...where ever you are, and what ever you're doing. I haven't heard from anyone yet, but it's only been five days since end of term.

This isn't much of a letter, but it's been very quiet so far, and I've told you all my news. Be careful, and I hope to see you, or hear from you soon.

Harry

Sirius smiled fondly as he read over Harry's letter. He glanced up at his friend. "Do you think he's okay Moony?"

Lupin shrugged. "Seems to be. It's kind of hard to tell with Harry though."

Sirius grimaced. "Tell me about it. Did I tell you what happened last summer, when his scar hurt?"

"I don't believe so, no."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "He sent me a letter. Said his scar hurt. I, of course, wrote back straightaway, and told him I was returning to Britain."

Remus nodded encouragingly.

"So as soon as he gets my letter, he writes back just as fast as he can, and tells me he must have imagined his scar hurting." Sirius shook his head in exasperation. "I ask you. He wouldn't have written the letter in the first place if it hadn't been bothering him." He sighed then, and looked as serious as Remus had ever seen him. "He's just so...so small !" Padfoot blurted. "He looks like a stiff wind would blow him away."

Remus smirked, suddenly. "Better not let Harry hear you carrying on like that. Did I ever tell you what happened at the beginning of his third year?"

Sirius considered the question, briefly. "You told me about meeting him on the Hogwarts Express, and his reaction to the Dementors, then you skipped ahead a bit, and told me about how he did in class, and how he learned to conjure a Patronus."

"Oh. Well I left one bit out, then," Remus said, his amber eyes dancing with mischief. "I sent an owl ahead, explaining about Harry's reaction to the Dementors." He shrugged slightly. "It was a little unnerving seeing him go down like that. Anyway, when we got to the school, Professor McGonagall called Harry, and his friend Hermione Granger to her office. I found out what happened later."

"Well?" Sirius prompted.

"Minerva had summoned Madam Pomphrey to her office, and she immediately started fussing over Harry. Even threatened to make him spend the night in the hospital wing."

Sirius' eyes widened in comprehending horror. "In front of Hermione?"

"Oh, quite. Then Madam Pomphrey did something even more unforgivable."

Sirius' eyes were round now. "What?"

Remus' lips were twitching now. "She said dementors are terrible things, and started carrying on about the effect they have on people who are already delicate."

Sirius winced in sympathetic embarrassment. "Ouch. Poor kid."

"Indeed." Remus chuckled a bit. "I heard that Harry got right indignant about the whole thing. Told Poppy he wasn't delicate." He sobered, and looked Padfoot in the eye. "He was right, you know. He's about as tough as they come. I learned that when I taught him to conjure his Patronus."

Sirius nodded absently, looking at the letter again with a sad half-smile on his face. "You're right, of course, Moony. I just don't remember Prongs ever being that small."

Remus rolled his eyes. "That's because he wasn't, you daft git. Harry obviously inherited Lily's bone structure." He paused a moment, then added pointedly, "He did have two parents, you know."

Sirius grinned sheepishly in reply. Remus was right, as usual. He was going to make some comment, but he was interrupted by a huge yawn.

"Go back to sleep, Padfoot. Sorry to wake you."

"No," Sirius replied, his voice already thick with sleep, "you did the right thing. I really should reply to that letter, though."

"It'll keep, Paddy. I'll start the letter, and you can add your part when you get up."

Review this Story/Chapter

Chapter 8 - A Day Out

Friday, July 7, 1995

The late-morning sun shone brightly down on the streets of London. The weather was ideal for an outing--clear and mild with a dazzling blue sky, puffy white clouds, and just enough of a breeze to keep things from getting stuffy.

Harry Potter closed his eyes, and turned his face toward the sun for a few seconds while waiting for his chance to cross the street. Days like today were a rare treat. Until now, he hadn't realized how much he'd missed being outside. Now that he thought about it, he'd been inside the Leaky Cauldron for five whole days. Harry signed contentedly as the sun warmed his thin face, and the breeze tugged at his shaggy hair. Too bad he couldn't risk flying on his broomstick. If he could just have a go on his Firebolt, things would be just about perfect.

The traffic signal changed, and Harry hurried across the street and down the sidewalk with the rest of the pedestrians, taking note of the book stores, music stores, and hamburger restaurants he passed. Perhaps he could explore them later, but right now he was heading for a nearby Underground station. The very station, Harry remembered fondly, that he and Rubeus Hagrid had traveled to when he'd visited the Leaky Cauldron for the first time. As he continued on his way, Harry wondered absently how the half-giant was doing. It sounded as though Dumbledore was planning to send Hagrid and Madame Maxime as emissaries to the giants, to try and prevent Voldemort from gaining their support. The boy hoped all was well with his friend. When Hedwig returned, he would send him a letter.

Harry rolled his eyes a little as he reached his destination, and followed a group of people downstairs. Looking back now, it was hard to believe how utterly unprepared he'd been for his first contact with the wizarding world. He remembered looking up at Hagrid after reading the list of required supplies for his first year at Hogwarts. "Can we buy all this in London?" he'd asked in amazed disbelief. It just didn't seem possible.

"If yeh know where to go," Hagrid had replied, a merry twinkle in his beetle black eyes.

Harry still hadn't been completely convinced. He knew London was a large city, with plentiful and diverse shopping areas, but really! A cauldron? A wand? Dragon-hide gloves?? Harry had balked a little at the concept.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had known he was a wizard, of course, but they'd kept everything from him, and grown angry whenever he tried to ask questions. They'd claimed that James and Lily Potter's deaths, and Harry's lightning bolt scar had been caused by a car crash. All his life Harry had listened to Uncle Vernon bellow, "There's no such thing as magic!" It had been hard, at first, to accept that magic was real. Harry had spent his first few hours with Hagrid terrified that this was either some colossal joke, or else a highly detailed and wondrous dream. Any minute he had expected to wake, and find himself back with the Dursleys in the dilapidated little hut on the rock.

The idea of magic, however, was nothing compared to the reaction he'd set off at the Leaky Cauldron. When Tom had realized who he was, and blurted his name, a hush had fallen over the tavern. Witches and wizards had clustered around him, wanting to shake his hand and welcome him back. He'd been told more times than he could count what an honor it was to meet him. After almost four years, he was becoming more accustomed to it, but even now, Harry found his fame disorienting. His sudden celebrity had contributed more to his culture shock than talking mirrors, ghosts, moving staircases, flying cars, and Mountain Trolls combined.

Harry picked up a map of the London Underground at the ticket counter, bought his pass, and headed for the platform. It's all rubbish, anyway, he thought, as he watched a train pull into the station. He rather doubted that he was all the wizarding world made him out to be, but he also like to think that he wasn't as utterly contemptible as his relatives claimed. At least he hoped he wasn't. In the muggle world, the Dursleys thought of him as an embarrassment...a burden. His very presence in their house was a dirty little secret that they went to great lengths to hide. Harry shrugged philosophically. The truth was

somewhere between those two extremes--hopefully closer to the good end, though sometimes he wasn't sure.

Harry entered the train when the doors slid open, and chose a seat by a window. He smiled lightly, once again reminded of the kindly half-giant, and how he'd carried on about dragons, and parking meters, and muggle transportation methods. Harry knew he had been very lucky to have Hagrid as a guide, and wondered briefly how muggleborns like Hermione managed to cope. Actually, Harry realized, he'd never given the matter much thought. Hermione had always seemed so knowledgeable and in control, he'd never thought to ask how she reacted when she'd received her Hogwarts letter. Harry frowned thoughtfully, then shrugged. Perhaps he would ask Dr. Granger.

A few last minute passengers boarded before the doors slid shut, and the train pulled out of the station. Harry watched through the window, until the train entered the tunnel leading to the next stop. When his view was restricted to a concrete wall, Harry turned from the window, and fished his shopping list and directions out of his shirt pocket.

When he'd finished his correspondence the day before, Harry had taken a good hard look at his belongings, and made a shopping list. It was a bit more extensive than he had expected, but it couldn't be helped. He needed socks, shoes, glasses, underthings, toiletries, and all his clothing needed to be replaced--even his Hogwarts uniforms.

The young wizard chuckled softly when he remembered trying to get dressed earlier that morning. He'd decided to wear his school uniform shirt and trousers, so he wouldn't look like a complete ragamuffin, and had been utterly shocked to find his arms and legs longer than his clothes! Perhaps that was the cause of that annoying soreness he'd had. He could still get into his shoes, though his toes just barely fit, and he seemed to be the same size around the middle, but his shirt felt a little tight across the shoulders. He was definitely showing some ankle and wrist as well.

He'd purchased that uniform...when? Summer before third year? Last summer? Harry shook his head impatiently. It didn't matter. The point was, Madame Malkin had allowed plenty of growing room. If his shirt

sleeves and trouser legs had been any longer, he might have lost house points for sloppiness. Now that he thought about it, by the end of last term, his sleeves seemed to creep up his arms, and the legs of his trousers were just barely brushing the tops of his shoes. He'd just been too distracted to notice. Glancing at his laundry pile, Harry also noted that he hadn't needed to roll up the sleeves and trouser legs of the muggle clothing he had worn yesterday. Harry had been wearing Dudley's hand-me-downs since school let out, so he really hadn't noticed his new height.

In the end he had changed out of his outgrown uniform, and donned one of his older muggle outfits instead. Either way he was no fashion plate, but, in Harry's opinion, clothing that was too large, but close to the proper length looked less stupid than clothing that was too short. The boy glanced down at his attire and shuddered slightly. Dudley's old clothes were so large he hoped he never completely grew into them.

It was amazing, really, Harry had thought, as he studied his reflection in the mirror. He couldn't believe it. Because of the TriWizard Tournament, he had spent quite a bit of time this past school year so nervous he was almost physically ill. His diet and eating habits suffered when he was worried, sad, angry or depressed. He tended to close in on himself and go off food, but evidently he had gotten enough, hence his little growth spurt.

Then again, maybe it wasn't so amazing after all. Ron, Hermione, and what seemed like half of Gryffindor Tower--Ron's family, the Quidditch Team, and his dorm-mates to name a few--knew this was a quirk of his, and usually pestered him into eating at least a little, even when he didn't want to. Plus, he'd certainly been getting enough to eat since he'd been at the Leaky Cauldron. I really am lucky to have such good friends, Harry thought as the train sped thorough the tunnel. A determined little frown crept onto his face, and he lifted his chin almost defiantly. He'd do whatever he had to. No one else was going to get hurt because of him if he had anything to say about it.

The train began to slow as it pulled into the next station. Harry glanced quickly at his Underground map, then at the directions Dr.

Granger had given him. He was on the right line, but there were still a few stops before he got to the one he wanted.

When Harry had placed the call to the Granger residence that morning, he'd been prepared to confess to Hermione. He couldn't see any way out of it. He had reckoned she'd want an explanation when he rung her up, then asked to borrow her mum, but that hadn't happened. He had fretted over whether he was calling too early, but he'd caught Helen Granger at home alone. Hermione and her dad were already off on their annual all-day father-daughter outing, and Helen wasn't expecting them back until supper or later. "Hermione will be sorry she missed you, Harry, though I must say, an owl last night, and now a call? Do you have designs on my daughter, Mr. Potter?" she had teased.

Harry was sure she must have been able to hear him blushing through the phone. "She got my note already?" he had asked, neatly sidestepping the question and trying to sound surprised.

"Yes indeed. She was very happy to hear from you. So you're a working man now, are you?"

"Yes ma'am. Actually, erm, actually, that was part of the reason I called," Harry said, then plunged on before he could change his mind. "I need to buy some clothes and things, for the job I mean, and since you live in London, I was wondering if you could recommend some stores?"

"You're coming all the way to London?" Dr. Granger had sounded puzzled. "Wouldn't it be easier to just visit some shops down in Surrey?"

Oh, right. She thinks I'm still in Little Whinging. Harry thought fast. "I have to go to Gringott's and change some of the money in my vault into pounds," he said. It was the truth, after all. The wizard bank opened soon, and he was planning to go there as soon as he hung up. "I need muggle clothes, so I figured I'd just do my shopping in the city."

Dr. Granger had paused, mulling over his words. "You're coming to London alone?" she asked, seeking clarification.

"Yes. My supervisor let me have today off to take care of it."

"But why... What I mean is, where are... Umm..." Helen hadn't known how to phrase the question she wanted to ask without sounding completely tactless.

Harry had understood, though. He had replied in what he hoped was a casual voice, "My aunt and uncle aren't available at the moment. I'm sorry to trouble you, but this came up rather suddenly, and you did say I could call..." Harry trailed off and began to lose confidence when her shocked silence continued to hum over the line. "Never mind, then. I...I just thought the trip might go a little smoother if I talked to someone who knew where things were--I'm more familiar with Diagon Alley than London. Could I try to ring Hermione another time?"

"What? Oh! No, wait, Harry," Helen had said, realizing he'd misinterpreted her lack of response. "I'm sorry. Of course you can call on us any time. I was just a little surprised that you're being allowed out on your own."

"Well, I'm sure this isn't anyone's first choice, but there it is," the young wizard replied frankly.

"Too true," Helen agreed, then brightened.

Harry ran a hand through his unruly hair, pushing it out of his eyes, and observing idly as the train reached the next stop. It seemed Dr. Granger had plans of her own. She was going to spend some time at her office that morning, and run errands in the afternoon. Quick as you could say "Bob's your uncle", he had an engagement to go shopping with his best friend's mother, complete with a luncheon date. He still wasn't quite sure how that had happened. He'd only meant to get some advice, and maybe some directions when he called, but Helen was harder to argue with than Hermione was. As a result, he was getting a later start than he'd planned. Dr. Granger had some

work to do, he had to allow himself time to "get to London from Surrey."

The boy raised a bemused eyebrow. He now knew where Hermione's way of speaking very quickly when she got enthusiastic or excited about something came from. He was also beginning to suspect that Dr. Granger was just as adept as her daughter was at assimilating information and putting things together. If he didn't want her guessing his situation, he'd have to stay on his toes. Harry frowned moodily out the window as the train continued on its way, and wondered if it would be more efficient to just confess now and get it over with.

When he got to his stop, Harry exited the train, made his way up to the street, and set out for the dental office that the Grangers were partners in. Helen's directions were very good, so in no time at all, the Gryffindor found himself in a neat, cheerfully decorated waiting room. After a brief conversation with the receptionist, Dr. Granger came hurrying up from the back.

"Sorry, Harry. I'm almost finished. Why don't you come on back?" she invited.

Harry nodded good naturedly, and followed her back into one of the examination rooms. Once there, he looked curiously around at the various machines, and gleaming tools, while Dr. Granger finished sorting the files she had been working on. "Thinking of a career in dentistry, Harry?" Helen asked with a smile, noting his interest.

When Harry had flushed, and haltingly admitted that he'd never seen such things before, Helen had been scandalized. Harry had been unceremoniously plunked down in the examination chair, and Helen had quickly checked him over for any soft spots or weaknesses. Accustomed to dealing with Hermione when she got a bee in her bonnet, Harry had thought it best not to argue, and had submitted to her probing and scraping without protest.

"Well, I must say, Harry, you either take exceptionally good care of yourself, or you're blessed with really good genes," Dr. Granger said a few minutes later. "Nevertheless, you should be having proper

exams and cleanings. If you'd rather go to a dental office closer to your home, that's fine, but don't neglect your teeth."

Harry had agreed, and dutifully made an appointment when they passed the receptionist's desk. He and Helen had then set out for a nearby shopping center. Their first stop had been a store which advertised their ability to have glasses ready in about an hour. Harry managed to get a same-day appointment with optician's office that was affiliated with the store. There was a little time before Harry's appointment, so they nipped up to the food court for lunch.

Harry had been afraid that he and Dr. Granger might be hesitant, or awkward with each other, but to his pleasant surprise, they had been remarkably at ease. Of course it helped that they had a favorite subject in common: Hermione.

Helen had been curious to know more about Hermione's life at Hogwarts, and how she had come to be such good friends with Harry and Ron. Harry had obliged her with some of the more innocuous stories in his repertoire. He'd started with their initial meeting on the Hogwarts Express, and ended with his overwhelming gratitude at the way she'd believed him, and stood by him this past year. "I didn't deserve it," he'd told Helen. "Especially after I was such a petty, unforgiving git our third year."

"You're growing up, Harry," Helen said knowingly. "It takes a lot of heart to admit your mistakes. Just be sure to learn from the experience so you don't repeat them."

When they'd finished eating, they'd split up briefly. Helen escorted Harry back to the optometrist, then left to run a few short errands while he seeing the doctor. Harry filled out the forms for their files, then occupied himself with the brochures in the waiting area. The one about contact lenses especially the section called "For Today's Active Lifestyle" caught his interest:

Whatever your sport, with outstanding fit and comfort, today's lenses are ready to play. Made of special materials that give them better fit, today's contact lenses remain in place under almost all conditions--

allowing you to concentrate on the game, and keep your competitive edge.

Ooooooh, yes. Harry was liking the sound of this. He grinned as he skimmed the list of benefits contact lenses as opposed to glasses:

Contact lenses are more comfortable...don't splatter or break...don't fog up from perspiration...don't steam up in the locker room...promote better depth perception and peripheral vision...improve your ability to judge distance and speed...

Better and better. Harry's grin turned a little wolfish as he slipped into "Destroy Malfoy" mode. Contact lenses sounded tailor made for Quidditch. Draco Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team would never know what hit them.

Harry sobered a little when the other Hogwarts seekers, Cho Chang and Cedric Diggory crossed his mind. It still hurt to remember what had happened to Cedric, but Harry had found it easier to bear since the night he'd had his little meltdown. He didn't like what had happened, and never would, but he had done the right thing, offering to tie with Cedric. Of that he was certain. Harry had spent the last few nights studying the circumstances from every possible angle. He'd had no way of knowing that the cup was a portkey. Even Dumbledore hadn't known. Allowing himself to sink into despair, and wallow in his own misery accomplished nothing, and certainly didn't honor Cedric's memory. Harry had made up his mind to play Quidditch next term, unless it was canceled again. He wouldn't allow Voldemort to take another thing he loved away from him.

Besides, hadn't Hermione said he looked different without his glasses? They might be useful for his little charade as well. He'd definitely have to see about getting some. Harry glanced briefly over the sections that described lens types, and care, and perused another brochure which advertised color contact lenses before the doctor called him.

By the time Helen Granger made her way back to the eyeglasses store, Harry was finished with his exam. She found him standing in front of the men's eyewear display, prescription in hand, and looking

a little rattled. "So, how did it go?" she asked in way of greeting, as she approached the boy.

"Fine," Harry replied distractedly, still looking at the wall. "I'm just trying to choose some frames." He turned and grinned shyly at her. "I've never been allowed to choose before," he confided.

Helen nodded, assuming his aunt had always had the final say when he'd gotten glasses in the past. She did wonder about the woman's taste, though. The thick, black frames Harry was wearing were serviceable enough, she supposed, but they really didn't do anything for him. At length, they had selected some smaller, thinner, wire frames, that suited Harry far better, and didn't overwhelm his face like his old ones had.

Helen had looked on curiously as Harry paid for his purchases. "Contact lenses as well?" she noted, amused, as they left the store, and headed out into the mall. The boy had nodded enthusiastically and dug a crumpled brochure out of his trouser pocket, pointing out the section that extolled the virtues of contacts and "Today's Active Lifestyles". Of course, Helen smiled, amused, as she read over it. Lads and their sports. And here I thought he was going vain on us.

If Harry thought the choices in men's eyewear were impressive, he found himself completely overwhelmed when confronted with the wonderful world of retail sales. In the past, Aunt Petunia would stiffly present him with a bundle of Dudley's outgrown clothing, and that would be that. He'd never really been clothes shopping, except for Madam Malkin's of course, and that didn't count. He had a list of exactly what and how many of each item he needed when he shopped there. There were no choices. All the uniforms were the same. The only time he would have had a choice was last year when he'd needed dress robes--and Mrs. Weasley had picked those out for him. She had fetched last year's school supplies for her children, Hermione, and himself while they had attended the Quidditch World Cup.

He had found himself floundering in this unfamiliar and confusing environment. There had been so much to look at! He hadn't known where to begin, or what to choose, and he'd been completely baffled

by the salesclerks and their offers of help. He hadn't even known his current size for Heaven's sake!

Dr. Granger's presence had been immensely reassuring and helpful. She had gently steered him in the right direction, dealing with the questions of salesclerks, taking his measurements so they could judge his size, and showing him how to mix and match a few separates to make several outfits. She also knew how to take advantage of sales, and where to get the best price. Harry reckoned he learned more about value and cost comparison in one hour with Hermione's mother than his aunt had managed to pick up in her whole life. As a result, he was able to purchase more than he thought.

For her part, Helen marched Harry from shop to shop, running interference with the sales staff, and thoroughly enjoying the slow metamorphosis taking place in front of her eyes. Harry, she had discovered, looked best in and darker, brighter colors, and simple, tailored styles that accentuated his coloring, and played down his thinness. Helen shook her head in wonder. When the boy had hesitantly come out of the dressing room so she could see the clothes he was trying, the difference had been startling. Harry was still boyishly slight, and a little gangly and coltish in appearance, but the raw material was there. When he got past the "all elbows and knees" phase he was going through and filled out a little, the kid was going to be devastating. Helen considered him speculatively. He might be worthy of Hermione...maybe.

Helen chuckled a little at the direction her thoughts had gone. Easy old girl, she counseled herself. No need to rush things. They're just kids, after all, and they might not even be interested in each other.

Actually, Helen thought as she pulled her thoughts back to the present, she was beginning to wonder if they were going to have to make more than one trip. They were only buying the bare minimum, but Harry needed so much! She wondered how they would ever carry it all, but when she'd voiced her concerns to him Harry had simply smiled, and pulled a crumpled shopping bag out of his pocket.

Tom, from the Leaky Cauldron had let him borrow it, the boy explained. It had lightening and expansion charms on it. Helen had

watched, amazed, as he'd paused in a handy hallway, and proceeded to stuff everything he'd bought so far into the bag. "Shall I carry yours as well?" he offered politely, gesturing to the purchases she carried. Helen, still a little dumbstruck, handed her items over without comment, and watched the teen place them in his seemingly bottomless shopping bag. Yes, magic definitely had its uses. She wondered absently if Hermione could make a bag like that for her. It would certainly come in handy when it was time to go Christmas shopping.

The trip to the barber had been another revelation. Harry had protested, saying that it was just a waste of time, but Helen had insisted, and the results had been well worth it. The boy's hair was still jet black, and just as messy as ever, but the stylist had changed something-- the length? The shape perhaps? Dr. Granger couldn't quite put her finger on what was different, but something was. Like his glasses, Harry's hairstyle had simply overwhelmed his face. Long strands still flopped on his forehead, to hide his distinctive scar, but the overall look was different--more appealing, somehow. She pulled herself out of her reverie, and noticed Harry was frowning thoughtfully at his reflection.

"What's wrong dear? Don't you like the haircut?"

"What? Oh, no. The cut is fine, Dr. Granger," Harry said, turning to grin at her, "I was just trying to figure out if it was going to last."

"Well, you'll have to get it trimmed now and then," Helen teased.

Harry snickered quietly, and motioned her nearer as they exited the barber shop. "Did Hermione ever do accidental magic before she got her Hogwarts letter?" he asked.

Helen nodded, refraining from launching into specific stories for the moment.

"I did too," the boy admitted quietly. "I think I kind of kept my hair the way it was subconsciously or something. No matter how many times Aunt Petunia used to send me to get my hair cut, it always looked the same. I'd come back from the barber looking like I hadn't been at all."

Harry frowned a little, then continued. "Once she got fed up with it and cut it herself. She left the front long, to cover my scar, but it was very short everywhere else." Harry had paused and given Dr. Granger a rueful half smile. "It looked terrible," he continued when she didn't speak. "Anyway, I worried all night about how everyone at school was going to tease and laugh at me, but when I woke up the next morning, my hair was exactly as it had been before she cut it." Harry shrugged. "I wasn't trying to be difficult earlier, I guess I've just thought that there was no point in trying to change my hair since that happened."

Helen nodded thoughtfully. "It will be an interesting experiment," she agreed, "but I think it will stay because you like it. You admitted you didn't care much for the results of your aunt's efforts."

"That's true," Harry said, gagging eloquently before consulting his list. He skimmed the checked-off items: shirts, trousers, socks, shoes... "I still need to pick up my new glasses, and visit the chemist," he informed her, then I should be done. "What about you, Dr. Granger?"

"I'm almost finished as well. I must say, I wasn't sure what to expect, but I've enjoyed today tremendously, Harry."

The young wizard grinned in pleased embarrassment. "Thank you Dr. Granger. Likewise."

"Next time we'll have to bring Hermione along," Helen teased. She about half expected Harry to blush again, but he just continued to smile at her.

"Yeah. Although I hope this won't be necessary again for a while. A few things might be all right, but I daresay today could be classified as a workout."

Helen laughed fondly, and ruffled his hair. Before too long, she was staring in amazement at the full results of the days' shopping. "How's that" the optical technician asked, as Harry slid his new glasses on. Harry's green eyes grew round with wonder. "Oh, wow!" he gasped. "I can't believe I was getting along with my old pair! Everything is so

much clearer now!" He turned to Helen. "So what do you think? Did we do well?"

"Full marks, Harry, full marks." Helen shook her head in bemusement. "Good Lord, child, you look like a different human being."

He perked up at that. "Really?"

"Yes, really. If I hadn't been with you all day today, I'm not sure I'd recognize you."

Harry's grin turned wicked. "Could I ask for a favor?"

"I suppose," Dr. Granger hedged.

Harry laughed at her hesitation. "It's nothing horrible, I promise. I know you'll have to tell your family where you've been all day, but could you not tell Hermione about my, erm, new look? I want to surprise her the next time I see her."

Once his glasses had been fitted, Harry moved on to the contact lens area. The doctor had called in his order to the warehouse, and had Harry's new clear and colored lenses ready. At first the lenses had felt very odd, sort of like an eyelash had fallen in his eye, but Harry had quickly grown used to the sensation.

"All right now, let's make sure these are all right," the technician said, motioning for Harry to remove the clear lenses, and slip the colored ones in. Obediently, Harry did so, and a few seconds later, a virtual stranger was staring back at him from the mirror. That was what people noticed, Harry decided. The hair, the eyes, and the scar. Man, what a difference changing his eye color made!

"I still don't know why you want to change your eye color," the tech said frankly. "You look like you're wearing green color change lenses already."

Harry had shrugged, blinking his now brown eyes guilelessly. "I just wanted a change, I guess."

"Suit yourself. It looks like everything is in order. Do you understand the procedure for caring for the lenses?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"All right, then. What do you want to wear out? Glasses, clear, or color?"

"Clear, I think." Harry changed his contacts again. He was actually getting pretty good at this. Initially he hadn't thought he'd be able to control his blink reflex long enough to insert and remove the lenses, but he was getting better with practice.

Helen was checking her messages when he exited the fitting area. When Harry came up to her she sighed regretfully. "I was going to see if Greg and Hermione had any plans for supper, but they've decided to go to the cinema, and won't be back until late."

Harry had been disappointed, but recovered quickly. "It isn't that hard for me to get to the train," he said, shrugging his slim shoulders, as they walked toward the chemist. "I can come another time when it's more convenient." Harry stopped and bit his lip, before looking uncertainly at Dr. Granger. "I really appreciate you helping me out today. I had no idea what I was getting myself into."

"It was nothing, dear. I enjoyed it," Helen smiled as they reached the store. She really had. To her surprise, Harry was a pleasant and amiable companion. He also had the good sense to recognize how wonderful her daughter was, and didn't mind swapping stories with her--to a point. Yes, Hermione had a good friend in this one.

"Mum?"

"Helen? Are you still awake dear?"

Helen blinked in confusion, then saw the telly and relaxed. She must have nodded off.

"Mum?"

Ah. Hermione and Greg were back. "In here," she called, and soon she was facing her family. "How was your day?" she smiled.

"Brilliant, mum! You really should have been there," Hermione bubbled, full to bursting with tales of the day.

Helen settled back contentedly, and listened to her husband and daughter. She always loved listening to their stories, but tonight she was waiting for the question one of them would inevitably ask her.

"So, Mum, what did you do today?"

Helen grinned inwardly. Yes, that would be the one. She stretched languidly, then smiled up at her husband and daughter.

Chapter 9 - Plans in the Making

Wednesday, July 12, 1995

The old Riddle House stood on a hill overlooking the village of Little Hangleton with all the grace and warmth of a hungry vulture. About fifty years ago, it had been a grand manor house, home to Mr. and Mrs. Riddle, and their grown son, Tom. Now it was a mere shade of its former self, with broken windows, missing roof tiles, and ivy spreading unchecked in the gardens and on the exterior walls.

The Riddles had not been popular with the other Little Hangleton residents. They were aristocratic, and class-conscious, and kept mostly to themselves, but their story, or parts of it, were well known in spite of this. It was a beloved piece of local folklore, known to all the locals, and its legend grew with each retelling. It was a most compelling saga, after all, which included many of the best story elements: love, tragedy, betrayal, mystery, and unexplained death.

The Riddles, it was said, were not the friendliest of sorts. All three of them had no patience with anything or anyone different or unusual, and they considered themselves a cut above the other villagers. The parents were considered snobbish at best, and Tom was worse if that was possible. All of Little Hangleton had always been assumed that he would be married off in some huge pre-arranged affair to one of the more well-to-do girls from Great Hangleton or some such place. It had been a huge surprise to the locals, then, when Tom hit young adulthood, and began seeing a local village girl. Not once in their wildest dreams had the villagers ever suspected that Tom Riddle would fall for one of their own...or that his parents would tolerate such a relationship.

Sadly, it had not turned out well. The residents of Little Hangleton had been disappointed, but really not that surprised, when the Tom had abruptly severed relations with his young lover, and refused to even acknowledge her existence. His parents had never approved of her, after all. Humiliated and heartbroken, she had eventually left Little Hangleton, and had never been heard from again.

The whys of the relationship always provided ample fodder for the speculation mill. Even after nearly seventy years, people still wondered why Tom Riddle cast her aside so coldly. Some thought she might have been pregnant. Others speculated that his parents put pressure on him to end it. Still others guessed that he might have just tired of her, like a little boy might abandon an old toy in favor of a shiny new one. Blame was almost always laid at Tom's door, and not the girl's. She had been gentle soul, sweet and well liked if somewhat unorthodox. The villagers did not think she broke it off, and could not envision her cheating on Tom, or doing anything at all to deserve such callous treatment. Her fate was also the topic of much debate. A few practical individuals thought she must have picked up the pieces and gotten on with her life. Others with a more romantic or morbid bent, insisted she had died--in childbirth, by her own hand, or wasting away from a broken heart.

There were some grains of truth in the rampant speculation. The girl had indeed been pregnant, but that was not the sole reason her relationship had crumbled. Tom had, in fact, cut all ties, and violently rejected her after discovering she was a witch.

One of the few times it was permissible for witches and wizards to purposefully reveal the magical realm to a muggle, was when the witch or wizard was about to forge some kind of familial bond with the muggle in question. Marriage was the most common circumstance, others included engagement, adoption, legal guardianship, and sometimes fostering. Most magical folk waited until they had some sort of promise, either legal or verbal, before sharing their secret, but the young witch Riddle was seeing did not. They had casually discussed marriage, and she had assumed he would be as pleased about the child as she was.

Unfortunately for her, Tom had not been supportive of her heritage, or the pregnancy, even going so far as to accuse her of infidelity. Repulsed and disgusted, he had abandoned her, advising her to get rid of the child, and leaving her to bear the burden alone. Secure in the knowledge that he was the injured party, Tom had returned to his parents, and his ancestral home. She had misrepresented herself to him, after all, and since she was a witch, surely she should have been able to prevent such a mistake. He never knew or cared that

she had died shortly after his son was born, only living long enough to name the squalling, dark-haired baby after his father, whom she still loved in spite of everything. Since his mother had seemed to be quite alone in the world, the attending midwife had turned little Tom Marvolo Riddle over to the authorities. From there, he had been placed in a muggle orphanage.

The villagers hadn't been privy to these details, so they had invented their own. Eventually, the furor over Tom's disastrous love affair had settled down, and other topics began to pop up in local gossip. The villagers generally agreed that the Riddle's were cruel and heartless as well as snobbish, but they had thought that before, and life in Little Hangleton had returned almost to normal.

Years had passed...some said fifteen, others insisted that it was closer to twenty. If nothing else had happened, Tom Riddle's little dalliance might have been forgotten altogether, but all chances of that had flown out of the window when Tom Riddle and his parents had been found dead one morning.

The town had broken into fearful, excited whispers, but no one had felt any true remorse. The townspeople were far more concerned about the capture of any mad killers running about than they had been about the deceased. Frank Bryce, the Riddle's gardener, had been arrested, and taken in for questioning, all the while claiming he had seen a stranger--a pale, dark-haired teenage boy--the night the family had died. His story had not been widely believed, but there had not been sufficient evidence to charge Frank with any crime. He had been released, and had continued to live in the gardener's cottage on the Riddle property until his death the previous summer.

The villagers now regarded the old house with suspicion, and refused to go anywhere near it. The practical villagers pointed out the shaky condition of the structure, the impractical ones insisted it was cursed or jinxed or haunted. Perhaps the vengeful spirit of the unfortunate girl lurked there. Maybe the Riddles themselves or Frank Bryce wandered the halls. People began avoiding going anywhere near the old residence. Even the village boys abandoned their ways of breaking the house's windows, and daring each other to enter it. The old timers who remembered when the Riddles had died were asked

to re-tell their stories. Frank's death had brought it all back, since he had been found in the same house, in the same condition as the Riddles had about fifty years before. That was the scariest thing of all. There had been no mark or injury on any of the bodies. They appeared, for all intents and purposes, to be perfectly healthy--except for the horrified looks on their faces. Was it possible to be scared to death?

Tom Marvolo Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort, sat by the fireplace in the Riddle House. His snake, Nagini, was at his side, and his servant, Peter Pettigrew, also known as Wormtail, cowered in the shadows, awaiting orders or instructions.

The house, Voldemort had decided would serve as an acceptable base of operations, for now. He remembered the first time he had come to this place--the first time he had laid eyes on his filthy muggle father and grandparents. He had not killed them immediately, of course. He had wanted his pound of flesh for his mother's desertion, and all the miserable years he had spent languishing in that horrible institution before getting his Hogwarts letter. It had felt good to lash out...to hear them scream and beg. He found he liked being the tormentor, instead of the tormented. Growing up in the muggle orphanage had been a wretched, miserable experience, and when he came into his power, Voldemort had decided that the world in general should pay for not saving and protecting him. He hatred, especially for muggles, mud-bloods, and the wizards who tolerated them, knew no bounds.

The Dark Lord sneered as he unobtrusively watched Pettigrew out of the corner of his eye. The man was a coward--a weakling both physically and magically--but for now, at least, he was necessary. Voldemort had managed, with Pettigrew's help, to construct another body for himself, using bone of the father, flesh of the servant, and blood of the enemy. Voldemort wished he could have seen the look on Wormtail's face when he had severed his own hand, and Potter's when his blood had been harvested for the potion. Instead he had to content himself with the memory of his servant's anguished sobbing, and the boy's pain and dawning horror when he realized his mother's

protection had been effectively nullified as far as Voldemort was concerned. The ceremony had been successful, but initially his new body had tired easily. The night of his rebirth and subsequent duel with Potter had taken more out of him than he would have liked. It had taken the better part of the last two weeks to build up his physical and magical stamina.

His Death Eaters hadn't suspected his infirmity, though. They expected him to bark orders, and were accustomed to waiting on him hand and foot. No one had commented when he took a purely "supervisory" role while the Riddle House was repaired and fortified with wards, protective spells, and Muggle Repelling Charms. He was Power Supreme. The Ultimate Dark Wizard of Recent History. As such he was not expected to dirty his hands with such mundane tasks.

Still, he had required the services of a full time servant, at least for the time being, and although he was a sniveling, incompetent, traitorous coward, Pettigrew had been the logical choice for that task. He was supposed to be dead, so he had no job to return to, no family or friends to notice his absence. Voldemort's mouth twisted into a cruel smile. His condition was improving daily. Once he got his strength back, he could always dispose of the annoying little parasite if he chose. For now, he would let the other wizard stay. Besides, Peter Pettigrew had information that would lead him straight to Harry Potter. As soon as the Snape's memory potion was finished, he could set events in motion.

Voldemort seethed a moment in frustration, as he remembered how his other carefully laid plan had been thwarted by a mere slip of a boy. Before, he had meant to rid himself of Potter quickly. A clean, surgical strike to show the wizarding world how foolish they'd been to pin their hopes on an untried youth. Now he intended to make his enemy suffer dearly for his humiliation. Yes, he would plan a much more...satisfying demise for the Brat-Who-Lived-Just-To-Annoy-Him.

Casually, he stood, and turned to face Wormtail, enjoying the way the man's eyes involuntarily widened in fright. "The hour of our meeting is nearly at hand," Voldemort said silkily. "I require your assistance in summoning the rest of my loyal Death Eaters."

Stifling a resigned sigh, Peter murmured an obedient "Yes, Master, it is my honor to serve you," and approached the dark wizard. Knowing what the other wanted, he knelt and stretched out his left arm, exposing the Dark Mark. God, but I hate this, Peter thought, bracing for the icy, long-fingered touch, and the pain that would inevitably follow. He suspected that the Dark Mark could be made to serve its purpose without having to hurt so damned much, but his master thrived on the suffering of others. Even when the tattoo was not in use, it itched and burned maddeningly. A little warning to the foolhardy that they were under the Dark Lord's scrutiny, and disobedience would not be tolerated.

"Death Eaters, answer my call," Voldemort intoned, laying his spidery hand on Pettigrew's left arm, and activating the Dark Mark with his magic. Peter winced, and cried out sharply as the tattoo burned under his master's touch, and the anti-apparition wards flickered slightly, allowing entrance. For a few minutes, nothing happened, then witches and wizards dressed in black Death Eater robes and masks began to arrive. With practiced ease, they formed a half-circle, before Voldemort, kneeling and bowing their heads in submission.

"Welcome Death Eaters," Voldemort spoke, finally removing his hand from Peter's arm, and facing them. Without preamble, he faced the Hogwarts Potions Master. "How is your potion progressing, Severus?" he asked, ignoring Pettigrew, as he whimpered, and rubbed his arm with his new silver hand.

"Preparations are nearly complete, Master," Snape's voice answered from behind his mask. "The potion will be ready by the week's end."

"Very well," Voldemort replied. He muttered a spell, and created a glass sphere, similar to a Rememberall. "Use this portkey to come here immediately when the potion is completed, then we can begin finalizing plans for Harry Potter's demise." Voldemort handed the portkey to Snape, then smiled cruelly. "And be sure to keep a better eye on your ingredient stores. I do not want to be inconvenienced again. Crucio!" he hissed, flicking his wand in Snape's direction, and holding him under the Cruciatus Curse for a few seconds as a

warning. Satisfied that his message had been received, Voldemort turned away from Snape, and snapped, "Malfoy!"

"Yes, my lord?"

"What is going on at the Ministry?"

"The minister still denies any knowledge of your resurrection, my lord," Lucius Malfoy reported. "Arthur Weasley and Amos Diggory have been sniffing around, trying to garner support for Dumbledore, but many are reluctant to oppose Fudge without proof."

Voldemort nodded, then narrowed his eyes speculatively. "What was reported about the TriWizard Tournament?"

"A very small article, Master. Harry Potter was named victor, and that was all. A great many details were hushed up."

"The boy who died was not mentioned? Not at all?" Voldemort pressed, cackling evilly when Lucius shook his head. "Excellent! The Ministry of Magic is doing our work for us." He rubbed his hands together, a look of unholy glee on his face.

"But, master," one Death Eater ventured timidly, "Don't you want the world to know of your triumphant return? Aren't we going to continue Slytherin's noble work?"

"Patience, Avery. You'll get to torture muggles and mudbloods soon enough," the dark lord sneered. "For now, we will be silent, so that when we do attack we will have surprise on our side." He glared at each of the Death Eaters in turn. "We would be unwise to tip our hand."

Saturday, July 15, 1995

You know, I think this may be what is meant by 'too much of a good thing,' Harry Potter thought distractedly as he pounded up Diagon Alley toward the Leaky Cauldron. Some of the merchants noticed as he passed, and friendly greetings floated in his wake.

"Alright, Jim?"

"Hey, Jimmy!"

"Hi, Sparky!"

The Gryffindor grinned and waved cheerily as he went by. His current job situation was a little difficult to describe. Harry supposed "shared asset" came about as close as possible. The Leaky Cauldron was still his primary place of employment, but at Tom's urging, he had started doing odd jobs around Diagon Alley as well.

Initially he'd been a little nervous about leaving the safety of his nocturnal routine, but Tom had insisted. "It'll do you good to get out, lad," the innkeeper had encouraged, when Harry had hesitated. "Don't think I haven't noticed you moping around the old place."

Harry had been shocked at that statement. He hadn't realized he'd been so obvious. Then it occurred to him that he hadn't been. Not really. Tom was just sharper and more observant than most witches and wizards gave him credit for. He played the parts of "harmless old man" and "kindly bartender" perfectly. Harry had noticed quite a few patrons of the pub area of the Leaky Cauldron having serious, sometimes personal discussions with his boss...just as he had that first Sunday. Harry grinned wryly. Tom probably had the latest dirt on most of the wizarding community, including the Boy Who Lived. Fortunately, Tom respected his patrons' confidentiality, and, in most cases, genuinely wanted to help them with their troubles. Harry had picked up on this when he had tried to explain his circumstances to Tom that first day.

For reasons he couldn't explain, Harry had been able to get a sense of a person's trustworthiness and motives since...well since always, really. He didn't understand it, and he couldn't always get a clear "reading," but over the years he had learned to trust whatever information he could glean from it. Tom was definitely okay in his book.

The brick wall that stood between the Leaky Cauldron's back yard and Diagon Alley now loomed in front of him. Harry skidded to a halt, and whipped out his wand, so he could tap the necessary bricks, to open the secret archway. While he waited for the bricks to separate, Harry walked in a slow circle, and took a few deep breaths. He supposed he hadn't really needed to run the length of Diagon Alley, but, stupid as it sounded, he loved the feel of his new trainers.

Size problems aside, by the time Dudley's old sneakers came into his possession, the soles had lost a lot of their springiness. Of course, his cousin probably compressed them faster than the average wearer because of his immense size, but that was beside the point. In a way, Harry had actually been sort of grateful for Dudley's weight issues. Dudley Dursley was heavy and strong, and a mean bullying git, but he'd never been what one would call physically fit, and he'd never had the stamina to run fast or far. Yep. Definitely his father's son. Harry, on the other hand was light and speedy, and could run like the wind, which gave him a definite advantage. They couldn't hit what they couldn't catch, after all.

The Gryffindor frowned thoughtfully as he crossed the yard, looking back to make sure the archway closed itself behind him. He hadn't thought of the Dursleys in days, and it wasn't because he had been trying not to think of them, either. No, he knew what that felt like. He was still fighting with all his strength to keep the memories of the Third Task at bay. Unfortunately, even if he was successful in pushing them aside while awake, the maze, Voldemort rising from the cauldron, Cedric's vacant gray eyes, and the Cruciatus Curse were all frequent visitors in his nightmares.

Harry found it rather ironic that he could grieve so for a boy he'd barely known before last year, a boy who he considered a rival for the affections of Cho Chang, when the loss of his last blood relatives, and childhood home inspired only intermittent pangs of regret. After he'd gotten over the initial shock, he found he just wished things could have been different between them, and that was all. Of course Cedric Diggory was dead, and the Dursleys were just gone, but what did that say about him? He'd been part of their household (at least on a part time basis) for almost fourteen years! Shouldn't he be more upset? Didn't he care? Harry twisted his mouth a little to one side as he

entered the tavern. He knew very well that if Professor Dumbledore had granted his request to stay at Hogwarts over the summer holidays when he'd asked back in second year, he would have never willingly set foot on Privet Drive again.

Staying close to the wall, and trying not to be obvious about it, Harry skirted the perimeter of the dining area, and ducked into the kitchen, catching Tom's eye as he did so. The innkeeper was tending to some late breakfast/early lunch customers, but the bar and dining area were mostly empty. Good. He needed to nip upstairs and wash up before preparing and serving food.

Patches blinked sleepily at Harry as he entered his room a few seconds later. The calico cat was stretched out on his bed, napping in a nice warm sunbeam. She had been in his room quite a bit since Hedwig had been gone. Harry strongly suspected she missed his snowy owl and was waiting for her to return. The two animals hadn't gotten on initially, but now they seemed to enjoy each others' company enormously. Harry supposed they must have bonded while exchanging mouse hunting tips. Now if he could just convince them to stop leaving him "gifts." The boy shook his head in gentle exasperation, touched and a bit embarrassed by their extravagant generosity.

The cat purred contentedly and closed her eyes, when he paused to scratch her ears and stroke her coat. "She should be back soon, you know," he told the cat. "Today, I reckon, maybe tomorrow." Patches looked haughtily at him, affecting an I'm-sure-I-don't-know- what - you're-on-about attitude before beginning to casually wash her face.

Taking the hint, Harry chuckled lightly. "All right, silly thing, have it your way," he said, giving her one last pat. "You're only in this room because the sunbeam that falls across that particular bed is clearly the warmest and brightest one the Leaky Cauldron has to offer. Dreadfully stupid of me to have thought otherwise."

Ducking into the bathroom, Harry quickly checked his appearance in the mirror. He had been stocking shelves at Quality Quidditch Supplies that morning, so he wasn't all that dirty. It wasn't like a couple of days ago, when he'd returned to the Leaky Cauldron

covered in mud. The apothecary had an extensive garden and made fresh ingredients available in warm weather. When Harry had shown up for work, he'd been tasked with weeding the garden and harvesting some common ingredients to refill depleted stores. That day, he had been forced to leave early, so he'd have time to shower and change before reporting to the kitchen for the dinner crowd. In spite of that, he had earned quite a few of the less costly refills he needed for his potions kit, and he'd already earned three of his fifth year texts at Flourish and Blotts. If this kept up, he would have no problem earning his school supplies before the start of term.

Peering curiously at his reflection, Harry tried to see what was so different as he hurriedly washed up. Truthfully, he hadn't expected this little ruse to work. To him, the change didn't seem all that dramatic. Yes, the startling green eyes he'd inherited from his mother were now hidden behind brown color contact lenses, yes, thanks to Hermione's mum, he was outfitted in clothing that fit properly, yes, his unruly mop of dark hair had actually stayed the way the barber had arranged it (for once), and yes, his famous lightning bolt scar was hidden from view, but how could such small things make such a huge difference?

Harry touched the thin strip of black cloth fastened around his head, amazed anew that something so simple could be such an effective disguise. As it was it had been a last ditch effort. Tom had tried without success to cast a Glamour Charm on his scar. It had also proven stubbornly resistant to general use concealers, both magical and muggle. Tom had even made a trip to Knockturn Alley to purchase a jar of the only 24-hour, guaranteed-to-cover-anything waterproof, sweatproof, won't-come-off-until-you-take-it-off concealing potion, a concoction known as the Mark Remover.

The Mark Remover wasn't exactly illegal, but it had a dubious reputation. Because it eliminated all traces of freckles, scars, birthmarks, tattoos and other skin irregularities, it was popular with magical folk who found such distinguishing characteristics to be inconvenient--fugitives from the law, and Death Eaters for example. The proprietor on Knockturn Alley wasn't surprised or suspicious when Tom came to see him. Although the Mark Remover was an excellent product, lots of stores refused to carry it, stating that it was

something no decent witch or wizard would use. Those who did, even for strictly cosmetic purposes, never openly spoke of it. This wasn't the first time, or the last, that Tom would walk into the little potions shop on Knockturn Alley to purchase a jar of Mark Remover for an anonymous guest at the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry spared the medicine cabinet an annoyed glance, while drying off. The Mark Remover, once purchased, had to be charmed to match the user's skin coloration, and was therefore non-returnable. The potion had worked as promised, erasing all traces of his trademark scar, but Harry had turned out to be mildly allergic to it, and couldn't wear it more than a few hours at a time without breaking out in a rash. It would do in a pinch, or for short appearances, but a better solution had to be found for day-to-day use.

Using the headband actually came up by accident. Harry had been doing a particularly hot and heavy job at the Leaky Cauldron the day after his shopping trip. Frustrated with having to mop his face every few seconds, and heartily tired of drops of stinging perspiration finding their way into his eyes, the teen had torn a strip off the bottom of the old muggle t-shirt he was wearing and wrapped it around his head. He'd kept some of Dudley's castoffs--the ones that were his approximate length--for dirty jobs. When Tom came to check on him, he'd immediately grinned, and pronounced himself an idiot for not thinking of it sooner.

So Harry now had a package from the "Workout Wear" section of Quality Quidditch Supplies containing a dozen strips of black cloth. Similar to muggle sweatbands and bandannas, but far thinner and lighter, the wizard headbands were designed to be extra absorbent, and let the skin breathe, with only one layer of cloth on the skin. They also sized themselves to the wearer, and closed in the back with a hook and eye, so one didn't have to worry about loosening knots, or slipping. Harry also noticed the black cloth blended in with his hair quite well, especially if he tucked it under his unruly strands. If he wore it high on his forehead, just barely covering his scar, it wasn't horribly obvious even in front.

As an extra protective measure, Tom had offered to cast a mild charm on the whole lot to make them seem unimportant and beneath

anyone's notice, but it hadn't really been necessary. The shoppers and merchants who did notice Harry's new headgear thought little of it. "Jim" was doing a lot of manual labor around Diagon Alley, after all, and the weather had been quite warm.

Harry grinned as he bounded back down the stairs, to the kitchen. Tom had arranged for some of his colleagues to come to the Leaky Cauldron, and meet "Jim" Sunday afternoon, after they closed. At Tom's gentle summons, Harry had come over to the table they were seated at, almost sick with nerves. He was certain someone was going to catch on, and identify him as Harry Potter, but amazingly no one had. He'd gotten a few contemplative don't-I-know-you-from-somewhere frowns, but those had disappeared almost immediately when Tom had proudly presented "Jim Patterson."

The last week hadn't been easy. The proprietors of Diagon Alley had been impressed with the Leaky Cauldron, but wanted to put Harry through his paces just the same. He'd started out at Flourish and Blotts Monday morning, trying to make sense out of their hopelessly disorganized storeroom. The manager there was known to be notoriously particular and hard to please, so he got to "try Jim out" first. Before the end of the day, his lavish praise of the boy had spread through Diagon Alley, and Harry now had more odd jobs than he could manage.

"Hello, Sparky. About time you got back," Tom teased, tossing Harry an apron, and chuckling at the way the boy rolled his eyes and grinned at his newly acquired nickname. Harry had picked it up a few days ago. He'd been shining the glass that covered Florean Fortescue's ice cream display, when the first customer of the day, a little old witch named Mrs. Talridge had come in.

She had smiled brightly at Harry's work, and reached up to pat his hand. "Very nicely done, dear," she had enthused, "The place just sparkles!" Florean, of course, had thought this was the funniest thing he'd ever witnessed, and started addressing Harry as "Sparkles" when no customers were about.

The whole thing probably would have blown over and been forgotten, if "Sparkles" hadn't been shortened to "Sparky" sometime during the

course of the day. Harry couldn't remember who had used it first, but the name had caught on, and now it he seemed to be stuck with it.

Harry gave a mental shrug as he quickly began dishing up and serving orders. He supposed if he was to have a nickname "Sparky" wasn't so bad. It beat the heck out of "Boy" and "Scarhead" and "Worthless Abnormal Freak" at any rate.

I wonder what Sirius will think of it. Harry thought with a quiet snicker, then arched an eyebrow as he remembered how the Marauders had come by their nicknames. I wonder if I have an animagus form, and if it would fit my nickname? That would be so cool--but what kind of animal does "Sparky" imply? Harry worked a few more minutes, then stopped short with a derisive snort. Oh, yes. I can see it now. Harry Potter the firefly. Now that's a right manly form, that is. I'm sorry I asked.

Tom smiled, pausing a moment to watch Harry work. He'd been right on two counts. Getting the boy out, and around people again seemed to perk him up, and alleviate some of the gloom from his demeanor, and he'd come back from his outing in London looking nothing like he had when he'd left. Tom hadn't been able to believe it. The withdrawn and rather scruffy-looking boy who'd left to go shopping had vanished.

Harry had proven that he was able to work unsupervised, but Tom suspected he had been brooding over his recent misfortune as he made his solitary rounds at night. A daytime routine which demanded that he interact with others provided a way to keep the boy's thoughts focused on the here and now instead of the past...or the future. Harry didn't complain, but slight shadows under his eyes showed he still wasn't sleeping all that well. Tom hadn't questioned the boy about it, because he didn't know if that was caused by nightmares, or trying to change his sleep pattern again. He'd finally decided to give it a little time before bringing it up.

He was pleased about all the positive reports and compliments he'd received about his new employee, however. Harry had only been "freelancing" for a few days, but he'd already established quite a reputation for himself. The lunch rush was winding down. Soon diners would just be trickling in two or three at a time. Tom smirked slightly

as he hurried over to set the tables Harry had just cleared. He couldn't wait to see the looks on everyone's faces when this charade was over and they all found out who "Jim Patterson" really was. He was so absorbed in his task, he didn't notice the Hogwarts owl gliding gracefully toward him until it dropped a letter on the table he was setting, wheeled around, and left as silently as it had come.

Tom frowned thoughtfully, then went into the kitchen where he found Harry placing dirty dishes in the huge sink, while his charmed brush and dish towel washed and dried busily. Tom turned the letter over in his hands, mystified. He had no idea why the headmaster or Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry would be writing him. Perhaps Harry had mentioned something in his letter to Dumbledore. The boy had sought him out and shown him a handful of neatly addressed envelopes before sending Hedwig off the previous Friday.

He'd been about to catch Harry's attention and ask if he knew anything about it, when Hedwig had swooped through the open kitchen door, and grabbed a double talonful of the teen's shirt.

"Hedwig!" Harry yelped in surprise, as the snowy owl hooted and flapped her wings furiously, trying to drag him in the general direction of the stairs. "Hey! Stop! Have you gone mental?"

Tom found himself worried, and wanting to laugh at the same time. The bird was obviously agitated about something, but the look on Harry's face was priceless! Taking pity on the boy, he hurried over to Harry, and tried to calm the owl. "Hedwig! Here girl," he called, hoping to distract her. "Don't worry, he'll go with you. Stop now, or you'll tear his shirt!"

Finally, Hedwig settled somewhat, and glided over to the back stairs, hooting at Harry when he didn't follow immediately. "Go on," Tom said to a thoroughly confused Harry. "We're almost done here."

Harry nodded and ran after Hedwig. Tom seemed to think that something was wrong, but Hedwig wasn't upset, she was excited. She was waiting at his door, diving and swooping and playing with Patches, who had evidently heard, and come through the cat-flap to greet her.

Harry shook his head and smiled in amusement as he watched the two. When he didn't open the door fast enough, Hedwig swooped over to him, and screeched her agitation, Hurry up! Hurry up! communicating clearly in her demeanor and body language. "Okay, okay," Harry said, fumbling with the door, and opening it. "I do wish I knew what your problem was..." he grumbled, then trailed off, staring in amazement at the sight in front of him.

Several letters were piled on his bed, and Ron's owl, Pig, was whizzing happily around the room, but what had Harry's undivided attention was a largish box, or rather the bird that was attached to it. "Fawkes??!" he finally gasped.

Chapter 10 - Replies

Saturday, July 15, 1995

Harry stared at the beautiful scarlet and gold phoenix for a few seconds, then gripped the doorframe for support and closed his eyes in hopeless resignation. It was over. All over. Finished. Done. Kaput. If Fawkes was here, Dumbledore surely knew where he was. It had been good while it lasted, but this seemed to be the end of his little charade.

An eerily beautiful note of phoenix song made him look up. Fawkes was studying him curiously, looking annoyed, and strangely hurt at the same time. When the firebird saw he had the boy's attention, he waved his wing impatiently, and lifted his fettered talon. Oh. Right. Harry thought belatedly. I suppose I should untie that box.

Giving the bird an apologetic half smile, the young wizard approached the bed on slightly unsteady legs, and gratefully sat down on it. "Hang on there, Fawkes. Won't be a minute," he said, shaky fingers fumbling with the cord.

Fawkes was now eyeing him with something akin to concern. Noticing, Harry gave himself a mental shake. The phoenix had saved his life at the end of second year when he'd been bitten by a Basilisk, and he certainly deserved to be treated cordially. Pull yourself together, Potter, he scolded himself. Are you a Gryffindor or aren't you! With effort, he swallowed, in spite of his impossibly dry throat, and managed to address his guest in a mostly normal tone. "Sorry Fawkes," he apologized sincerely, finally getting the box untied. "You just surprised me, that's all." He gently stroked the beautiful red and gold plumage. "It's always wonderful to see you," he added, afraid he might have given the magical creature the wrong impression.

Fawkes trilled another gentle, soothing note, and spread his magnificent wings wide. Harry suddenly felt much better, like a soft, comforting blanket had been wrapped around his shoulders. Without thinking, he directly met Fawkes' wise gaze, and fell into it as the power of the phoenix bored into him. It felt similar to what he, Harry, had done instinctively many times when trying to get the measure of

someone, but Fawkes was many times stronger, and this time, Harry was being assessed, not the other way around.

Fawkes had always seemed rather fond of Harry, probably because of his unwavering loyalty for Professor Dumbledore. He'd given Harry a discreet once-over, the first time they'd met, but he'd never subjected him to the full weight of his probing stare before. The wizard shuddered slightly, as the phoenix slipped past all his defenses to the essential Harry Potter, and was privy to everything from his headiest joys and triumphs to his deepest fears and sorrows. When it was over, the boy felt laid open, utterly bare, but somehow not violated.

Harry blinked slowly when he was released, and became aware that he and Fawkes were being observed very closely by all the animals in his room. Even hyper little Pigwidgeon was absolutely still, perched on the headboard beside Hedwig and the Hogwarts owl who had delivered Tom's letter. Hesitantly, he met the firebird's gaze again, and saw fondness, trust, and respect. "What...?" he tried to ask, but Fawkes interrupted him with a reassuring chirp, and flipped his wing towards the box he had delivered. Harry nodded, still a bit shaken, and opened the package. Inside he found a parchment envelope addressed to him in the headmaster's loopy handwriting. Harry raised a confused eyebrow, and wondered why Dumbledore had bothered to package a letter. Shrugging, he plucked the letter out of the box, and nearly fell off the bed in surprise when the package suddenly filled with an assortment of items. Okaaaay... Harry thought dazedly, as he tore open the envelope, and unfolded a rather long letter.

July 9, 1995

Dear Harry,

I imagine you have a great many questions just now. I will try my best to anticipate and answer them. If I miss any, please feel free to ask.

I suppose the first question, is why I am sending this package with Fawkes, and not one of the school owls. The answer is, I could think of no better way of assuring you that this package is indeed from me, and not a clever forgery. Fawkes will have undoubtedly subjected you

to his own unique scrutiny by now. I apologize for the necessity of this, but since you are reading this letter, and perceive more than one item in the parcel I sent, he has found you worthy of our trust. If you had not passed his test, you would be reading a slightly different letter, and wondering no doubt, why I used such a large box to send one small pendant.

What you have before you, are some standard field items that are given to members of the Order of the Phoenix when they are on assignment. The Order is a very old organization that was founded about the time Hogwarts was. It's purpose is to stand firm against dark witches and wizards, as they have a nasty habit of popping up from time to time.

Harry grinned in spite of himself. Professor Dumbledore made evil witches and wizards sound like they were nothing more than a troublesome patch of weeds in the garden.

You have not been conscripted into service, nor will you be required to go on missions. You have been entrusted with these items in an attempt to ensure your own safety, and to maximize the efficiency of your communication, but I'll get to that in a moment. Please do not discuss the box's contents or their magical properties with anyone. Some of them are not publicly available, and give us a huge advantage over our adversaries. If you will kindly empty the parcel and follow along, I will explain each to you in turn.

Shrugging agreeably, Harry did as he was asked, and soon had the box's contents lined neatly on the bed. He studied them curiously for a few seconds, then picked up his letter again.

You should find a phoenix pendant, some sheets of parchment, and some quills. Please take the pendant and put it on immediately. It is a standard portkey issued to all field operatives. When activated, it will transport you directly to the Hogwarts hospital wing. I do not anticipate the need for its use, but it will provide an escape for you, should you require it. You are probably aware that there are different types of portkeys...some activate instantly when touched, others activate at a predetermined time, and still others must be activated with a key word or phrase. The phoenix pendant is one of the last

type. To use it, clasp the charm tightly in either hand, and say "Sanctuary." Rest assured that the pendant can be casually handled without fear of activation.

Harry closed his eyes for a second, and took a deep breath. The very thought of portkeys still made him slightly queasy. He wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to look at one again without memories of the graveyard closing in on him. Actually, it was rather good of Dumbledore to reassure him without stating the issue point blank. Realistically, Harry knew he needed to try and get over his irrational fear of portkeys. As phobias went he couldn't think of many that would be more inconvenient, but he couldn't seem to help himself. He didn't want to touch it, despite his headmaster's assurances.

Seeming to understand, Fawkes gracefully leaned forward, grasped the chain in his beak, and presented it to the boy, making reassuring noises as he did so. Mollified somewhat, Harry gingerly accepted the chain and pendant, studying it a second before slipping it over his head. As a whole, the necklace was rather unisex in design, with an exquisitely wrought cloisonne phoenix pendant suspended on a plain gold chain. The charm was richly detailed, looking rather like Fawkes himself, and depicted a firebird in flight. Harry ran an admiring finger over it before tucking it safely under his shirt, and retrieving the letter again.

Before I continue, I wanted to take a moment to thank you for sharing your information regarding Voldemort. I had been told by another source that a memory potion was being brewed, but we had not been able to determine who the intended recipient was. Thanks to your furnishing that detail, my source was not forced to ask questions that might cast suspicion on himself.

This brings us to the parchment and quills included in your parcel. They are charmed to allow almost instantaneous communication. You simply write what you want to say on one of the pieces of parchment provided to you. The message will appear to soak into the paper, much like the effect you described with Tom Riddle's diary in your second year, and will be transferred to a corresponding piece of parchment in my office. This is the preferred method of communication for agents in the field, because it is faster than owls,

and virtually untraceable. Please use this to pass on information regarding Voldemort, no matter how simple or unimportant it might seem. And Harry, if your scar is bothering you, please say something. Madam Pomphrey and Professor Snape have many remedies at their disposal, and are happy to help. I am grateful for any information you can give me regarding Voldemort, but I do not want you sacrificing your health or suffering needlessly.

Back to the parchment, when you send your message, the charm on the paper will dissipate. If necessary, you may send some of your parchment back to Hogwarts to be re-enchanted. If not, consider your supply of parchment for the coming school year bought. Now, if you will kindly look at one of the pieces of parchment, you will notice some symbols across the top.

Harry looked, and saw a phoenix, a paw print, a crescent moon, and a serpent arranged in a neat row across the top of each sheet.

I have taken the liberty of selecting some people you may wish or need to contact directly. Touch your quill to one or more of the totems when you finish writing to select your recipient(s). The symbols represent myself, Sirius, Remus, and Professor Snape. You have my permission to write your godfather and Remus weekly using this parchment. I think it may help allay their fears for your safety. The parchment is bi-directional, so we may use it to contact you as well, but we will refrain from doing so as much as possible. Ordinarily, the parchment emits an attention-getting signal when an incoming message is received. I have removed this feature from your parchment because I know your muggle relatives are uncomfortable with the idea of magic. Please make sure to check your parchment for messages occasionally.

Harry raised an eyebrow, then a giddy smile crept onto his features. Professor Dumbledore still thought he was with the Dursleys! He wasn't found out after all!

Lastly, I wish to discuss owls with you. The charmed parchment will decrease the owl traffic at your residence considerably, but your owl is highly visible and recognizable. I have contacted Tom at the Leaky Cauldron, and asked him if he would mind occasionally making the

one of the Cauldron's owls available to you during slow times. It should be much more efficient than trying to do the same thing with school owls since the Leaky Cauldron is much closer to your summer home than Hogwarts is. You should know within the next few days if he agrees. By the way, I must say I was surprised to hear about your summer employment. I tried to make sure your relatives understood the seriousness of your situation when I wrote them before the end of term. However, if you say it's helping you put recent events out of your mind, perhaps it's for the best. In any event, you have your portkey now--do not hesitate to use it. Please look after yourself, and enjoy the rest of your summer.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore
Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

P.S. I nearly forgot! I forwarded your letter to Sirius and Remus. You should be hearing from them soon. Also, would you please thank Hedwig for graciously waiting while I assembled your package and guiding Fawkes to you? He is a magnificent creature, but I'm afraid he lacks the magical tracking ability of messenger owls. He should be able to get back to Hogwarts on his own, however. --A.D.

"Yessssss!" Harry leapt off the bed, and pumped a fist in victory. Everything was still okay. Well, except for Tom's letter. The boy stilled, and bit his lip nervously, wondering exactly what Tom's letter said, then shrugged. He'd find out soon enough. Remembering his manners, he turned back to the now rather amused-looking phoenix, and said, "Thanks, Fawkes. I really appreciate you coming all the way down here. Oh!" Harry suddenly remembered he hadn't offered any of the birds so much as a sip of water. He took care of that immediately, setting Hedwig's feeding dishes on the floor so that the flock could have better access. That done, he eagerly flipped through the rest of his letters, looking for....yes! There was one from Sirius.

July 9, 1995

Dear Harry:

Padfoot is asleep at the moment, so I'm starting this letter. We've been taking turns doing a very boring job, and my shift just started a couple of hours ago. Rest assured he'll add his part when he gets up.

First things first. If you can call this daft git by his given name, then surely you can call me Remus, or Moony if you prefer. I must apologize for not keeping in better touch this past year. I really have no good excuse. Albus and Sirius have done such a good job keeping me up to date with your news, I guess didn't realize I hadn't actually been in contact with you directly until your letter arrived today. I am flattered and properly humbled that you included me, and promise to do better in the future.

Sirius is well, and I'm about as good as can be expected with the full moon coming up on the 12th. Don't worry about your godfather, though. Albus has generously continued to supply me with the Wolfsbane Potion, and I have been dutifully taking it, but I really wish something could be done to improve the taste. Of course, now that I think on it, I don't believe I've run across many pleasant-tasting potions. Especially medicinal ones. How about you?

Speaking of you, how are you holding up? Sirius was very upset when he arrived at my home a few weeks ago, and with good reason, it seems. I wish there was something I could say or do to make things easier for you, although you seem to be managing fairly well. Keeping busy is indeed a good way to keep your mind off your troubles, just be careful when you're away from your uncle's house, and be sure you aren't internalizing all your worries. Your mum used to do that, you know. Drove us all mad. She was always very hesitant about sharing her worries and fears, and was more likely to look after others than herself...much like a certain young man of my acquaintance. You have a coping mechanism, and inner strength that is nothing short of remarkable, Harry, but don't be afraid to reach out to your friends. It's okay to let someone else be the strong one every now and then.

Dear me. I do believe that is the most serious paragraph I've ever written. Must be these times we're living in. You'd never guess I was one of the famous Marauders of Hogwarts. I'll try to do better in my

next letter. In the meantime, take care of yourself, and don't work too hard!

Remus Lupin

Harry blinked, a little shocked at how well the werewolf perceived him, and touched by the genuine fondness in the letter. He also appreciated the little clue Professor--no, Remus, had given him about his mother. Perhaps when they finished their current business, he could arrange a visit with Sirius and Remus. In the past, there had always been some pressing matter to attend to when he'd seen his godfather, and Remus had been his teacher, and not exactly accessible. It might be nice to have a chance to listen to their stories and just relax for once. With that in mind, Harry turned his attention to the second page of the letter.

Dear Harry:

Well, first of all, I want to thank my dear friend Moony for getting all of the heavy stuff out of the way up front. Perhaps I'll let him start all my letters. Let me simply echo his sentiments, and state that I will always try to be there for you if you need me, so we can move on to other topics.

Are those muggle relatives of yours treating you all right? Moony and I have catching a certain rat on our list of things to do, but unfortunately, it isn't our top priority at the moment. I'm hoping that it will be soon.

I see you're keeping busy! A summer job, eh? Pretty neat trick. How many additional wards and protective spells did Albus have installed? I was under the impression that you were going to be kept close to home this summer, but I'm glad you're able to get out a bit. You always struck me as the "take action" type, even when you were just a little thing. I'm also very impressed that you've already started doing your summer assignments. James and I were never that punctual. Lily was, though. Remus, too. They would start immediately, and get their work done straightaway, but Prongs and I liked to take it easy, and finish up a little at a time over the course of the summer.

Oh, speaking of assignments, take a friendly word to the wise: You might want to start looking over your old material now since you have your OWLS coming up this year. I can tell you from personal experience that those are a bit of a challenge just because of the sheer volume of material covered. You definitely don't want to get stuck cramming for those at the last possible minute. It isn't a pretty sight, believe me...and NEWTS are even worse. "Nastily Exhausting Wizard Tests" is a very apt description, though your dad's version "Never Ever Wait To Start", (studying) is good as well. James always did have a way with words.

Well, I want to get this on its way, so I'll close here. Take good care of yourself, and if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask!

Sirius

Harry smiled fondly as he folded Remus and Sirius' letter, then slid it back in the envelope, and reached for another.

July 7, 1995

Dear Harry,

Good to hear from you, mate. Hope the muggles are treating you right.

My holiday has actually been extraordinarily weird. For one thing we hardly ever see Fred and George. They've been holed up in their room most of the summer--Ginny and I can't even dig them out to play Quidditch or Exploding Snap. The first couple of days of the holiday they went to Diagon Alley, and Ottery St. Catchpole for "stuff," but they won't say what they bought, or what they're working on, or even where they got the money to go shopping in the first place. Do you reckon Ludo Bagman finally found his heart and made good on their World Cup wager? Or at least refunded their savings? Mum's been in a right snit about it, but I think she was more worried about them being out alone. Dad has been pretty cool about the whole thing, really. He reckons its their way of dealing with the stress of You-Know-Who being back, and is willing to let them be as long as no one gets hurt, and the house doesn't fall down from all the explosions.

Speaking of the house, Mum and Dad have been working in the evenings trying to get the Burrow "safe" so you can come visit. Bill, Charlie, and Percy, have been helping as much as they can, and Professor Dumbledore has even come a few times to see what he can do to hurry things along. Evidently laying protective spells, and constructing wards is a tricky business. Not only are the spells difficult, but they have to be cast in the proper order for maximum effect. They've had to take everything down and start over at least twice, but I think they have the hang of it now. Dad said Professor Dumbledore asked Minister Fudge if he would allow a team of Aurors to help, but he refused, the prat.

I suppose they could have been finished by now if they were just warding the house like they talked about at first. Mum and Dad decided to do a proper job of it though, so they're enclosing the yard, pond, dad's shed, and paddock as well. The good news is, once it's done, it's done, and the Burrow will be almost as well protected as your uncle's house with regards to magical attack, forever. The bad news is, it's just taking a little longer than expected.

So you have a summer job, do you? Doing what? And bloody hell, Harry! I understand you may be feeling a little mental what with recent events and all, but did you absolutely have to tell Hermione that you'd started your summer homework? You've got that girl in a right state because she thinks you might finish up before she does! And if that wasn't bad enough, she wants me to start on my assignments, and start reviewing for my OWLS now, too! You've created a proper monster, you have, but I suppose I can forgive you just this once.

Well, Mum wants me to help de-gnome the garden, and that was all my news anyway. Take care and write soon!

Ron

Harry laid Ron's letter aside, wearing a troubled frown. He'd never intended to be so much trouble, and yet... He reached into his jeans pocket and retrieved a small muggle notebook. Since he couldn't predict when would dream of Voldemort, or be able to "listen in" the 3

X 5 inch (or 7.5 X 12.5 cm if you prefer) spiral notepad and ball-point pen he'd purchased a few days ago had become his constant companions. They resided in his shirt or pants pockets by day, and laid on his bedside table at night.

He flipped rapidly through his entries until he found what he wanted--the entry he'd made just last night:

July 12 - Death Eater Mtg

SS promised V his memory potion by week's end. SS is to report to V when potion is done via portkey. SS was punished via Cruciatus Curse for delays.

Planning an attack on Privet Dr.? Me?

LM reported that Mr. Weasley and Mr. Diggory are trying to gather support for Dumbledore in the Ministry.

V plans to use the Ministry's inaction to his advantage--planning a surprise attack. No activity (muggleborn attacks?) until then. V doesn't want to raise suspicions in the Wizard Community.

Harry had seen the meeting in a dream, or vision, or whatever they were. The curious feeling of traveling to Voldemort's whereabouts, and invisibly watching the dark wizard's actions that he had initially experienced in Professor Trelawney's classroom was back. Voldemort's punishment of Snape had been meant as a warning, and he had not put his full might behind the curse. Harry had been dimly aware of his scar burning sympathetically as Snape clenched his teeth to avoid crying out, but the discomfort had not been severe enough to awaken him.

The major issues with his scar's painful reactions, and his new eavesdropping abilities seemed to be proximity and Voldemort's mood. Harry could always tell when the other wizard was nearby, because his scar reacted painfully. Now that distance was a factor, Harry noticed he could hear Voldemort the clearest when the other wizard was agitated, or angry. When he had visions, the intensity with which Voldemort cast his curses determined how badly his scar hurt.

It was almost as if their connection acted like an invisible wire, with Voldemort transmitting, and Harry receiving. The level of Voldemort's pique determined how much energy was pumped through their connection. It didn't appear to be bi-directional, and Harry had mixed feelings about that. If the connection worked the way he suspected, and strong emotions transmitted the clearest, Voldemort would have been drawn to him like a magnet his first or second day back from Hogwarts. On the other hand, it might be childishly gratifying to blaze his own anger and frustration over the link, and let Voldemort deal with the headache for a change.

He glanced at Ron's letter again, reminded of something. Hadn't the headmaster mentioned preparations? Was he referring to the wards then? Harry bit his lower lip. Dumbledore said he had a source, and that had to be Snape. Surely Mr. Weasley and Mr. Diggory had been warned that they'd been mentioned by name at a Death Eater Meeting, and were therefore in danger of attack. Arthur and Molly Weasley must be doing such a thorough job to protect their home and family, then. Surely they wouldn't enclose their entire property just for him!

Harry snickered a little when he re-read Ron's complaints about homework and OWL preparations. Sorry, mate, but Sirius says it's a good idea too, he thought with a shrug. And really, Harry was at a distinct disadvantage in some ways. Professor Dumbledore had canceled end of term exams as a school treat his second year, when the Chamber of Secrets mess had been sorted out, and because Harry had been a TriWizard Champion this past year, he had been excused from exams again. It had seemed like a wonderful idea at the time, but now he realized he had no practical measure of how much he had learned two of the four years he'd been at Hogwarts. And face it, Potter, you were in another world entirely a good deal of last year, worrying about that stupid tournament. Who knows for certain how much you retained. Perhaps he could get with Hermione and borrow her exams and study notes while they still had access to muggle copying centers.

The bit about Fred and George being on Diagon Alley was unsettling as well. From the sound of it, they'd come while he'd been doing his stint on the night shift. He'd have to keep an eye out for them--and

anyone else he bloody knew. Harry twisted his mouth to one side, while he considered this. His disguise was pretty good, but Harry wasn't sure if it was that good. Oh, well. He'd find out soon enough. In a couple of weeks Hogwarts letters would be sent out, and he was sure to run into all sorts of familiar faces.

Fawkes and the Hogwarts owl distracted him then, when they flew around the room once, then out the open window, chattering cheerily at him as they did so. Harry waved at the departing birds, and called his thanks, then returned his attention to his remaining two letters, while Hedwig and Pig perched on the headboard, and settled in for a nap.

The next letter was from Hermione, and by all appearances, he had fallen out of her good graces.

July 13, 1995

Harry James Potter!

Of all the stupid, thoughtless, juvenile behavior! I can't believe you spent the entire day in London, with my mother yet, and couldn't spare two minutes to ring me up to say hello! You could have easily reached me on Dad's mobile phone! Best friend indeed!

And while we're on the subject, what did you tell my mother about Hogwarts? She's been absolutely insufferable, and asking questions like mad! When I asked her where she heard all this, she just smiled, and told me you two had a nice little chat over lunch. If this is the kind of behavior I can expect, I must insist on being present for any future lunch dates you two have planned!

She did mention you bought some nice new clothes, for your job, but she's not telling everything she knows. I can tell. What are you up to, Harry? All she'll say is you have a surprise for me, you think you'll be able to visit again, and that you have very nice teeth.

Oh, well. I guess if the Dursleys are finally getting you some decent clothes, this job situation is for the best. What are you doing anyway? How are you liking it? Will you still be able to visit Ron's family?

Speaking of Ron, I just finished a letter to him. I'm glad you finally seem to be taking your studies seriously, Harry, but I think we (you, Ron, and me) need to start reviewing for our OWLS immediately. If you'll just think it over a minute, I'm sure you'll agree. I've gathered together all my homework papers, texts, and exams going all the way back to first year, and I'm shocked at how much material we've covered. Reviewing all this adequately is going to be a real challenge, especially if we want to have any free time this year. Plus, the tests also include the fifth year materials we cover to that point--stuff we don't even have access to yet! Oh, and just so you know, I've finished my Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, and Arithmancy assignments.

I suppose that's everything that's been happening here. Mum and Dad and I haven't made any firm plans about going on holiday. To tell the truth, I've rather enjoyed having some down time. Hedwig seems anxious to be on her way, so I'll close for now. Look after yourself, and owl or ring me up soon!

Hermione

Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when he got to the bottom of the letter. By the way it had started, he'd reckoned he'd have better luck getting Malfoy to study with him than Hermione, but the longer she wrote, the more she seemed to calm down.

Actually, Harry had considered calling Hermione--Dr. Granger had even offered to give him the number, but she'd also said this was Hermione's once a year, all day, father-daughter outing, and Harry had been hesitant to intrude. And he hadn't thought he'd told her mum anything that horrible. Sighing unhappily, he laid Hermione's letter with the others he needed to answer, and picked up the last envelope.

The writing on the thick, creamy parchment was completely unfamiliar--an old fashioned calligraphy, written in a strange ink that was metallic and iridescent at the same time. Curious, Harry flipped the envelope over, eyes brightening with recognition when he saw the

wax seal with a large "G" stamped on it. This must be the information he'd requested from Gringotts.

The dark-haired teen shook his head at the memory. Visiting Gringotts had been a real adventure. After he'd finished talking to Dr. Granger he'd told Tom where he was going, and scurried off down Diagon Alley. As it was still quite early, the street was mostly deserted, and it wasn't quite time for the bank to open. Harry had leaned against the white stone building beside the burnished bronze door, trying to look nonchalant while he waited. In reality his brain was buzzing with questions as he tried to work out what he thought things would cost, and how much he should withdraw. He didn't realistically know how much things like glasses and shoes, and muggle clothing cost. He'd been too young to notice how much Aunt Petunia had paid for his current pair of glasses, although he did remember how she'd carried on about the expenditure, and threatened him with dire consequences if he failed to properly care for them.

Harry had rolled his eyes at the irony. Her hissed threats and warnings were a bit rich, considering most if not all his glasses mishaps were caused or orchestrated by her dear "Dinky Duddydums." He'd taken the time to mull the matter over carefully, though, and decided to withdraw 500 galleons. Surely that would be enough. He'd gotten the shock of his life, when Griphook, the goblin who was waiting on him, did some quick computations.

"You say you want to withdraw 500 galleons, and you want that converted to pounds?" the teller had asked.

"Yes, please."

"Very well. You'll be wanting one of these, then," Griphook said, placing an object on the counter, that looked for all the world like one of the folders Harry had used in muggle school. The difference was, this one was sized to hold pounds sterling. Seeing Harry's blank stare he sneered, "It's a money minder. It really isn't safe to be carrying around such a large sum. That's charmed to make it look like a more reasonable amount."

"Oh," was all Harry could think of to say, realizing for the first time that this was not to be a one-to-one transaction. How much money did I just request, anyway? he wondered, then watched in alarm as Griphook rapidly counted out 2500 pounds.

"Exchange rate's good for you today," the goblin commented as he worked. "Five to one--not bad at all. The exchange fee is waived of course, because of your account status," he continued, counting the money again, then stuffing it in the money minder. "Will there be anything else, Mr. Potter?"

Not wanting to look like a complete idiot, Harry had calmly accepted the little folder, reasoning that he could always re-deposit what he didn't use later. Then, with aplomb that would have made Dumbledore proud, he had requested information on the balance and status of his account.

"You have not been receiving statements?" Griphook asked, looking shocked. At Harry's negative response, he excused himself, then returned a few minutes later carrying a large ledger.

Harry watched while the goblin flipped rapidly through the book, then ran one yellow fingernail down a column of vault numbers. "Ah. I see. Before their deaths, your parents mandated that should you placed under your muggle relatives' guardianship, all information pertaining to this account was to be held here at Gringotts until you reached the age of majority, and Albus Dumbledore was entrusted with your key until you began studying at Hogwarts." He frowned up at Harry. "It appears your parents thought it wise to hide this account."

Stunned, Harry had merely nodded. He'd chosen to do the same thing.

"Well then," Griphook snapped the ledger shut and became brisk and businesslike again. "Since you have very little activity in your account, Mr. Potter, it is subjected to quarterly instead of monthly audits. All activity is recorded and tracked, and I can give you the last tally, but I do not have your current balance at my fingertips. I can find out, but it will take time. Would you care to come back, or shall I owl you?"

"An owl will be fine, thank you," Harry had replied, becoming uncomfortably aware of the increasing number of people about, and itching to return to the Leaky Cauldron before he was spotted.

"Very well Mr. Potter, you may expect an owl in about five business days."

Harry broke the seal on the envelope and pulled out a blank piece of Gringotts letterhead stationary, with a goblin watermark. A life-size silhouette of a typical vault key was centered at the top of the page, and printed above the bank's name and address. The green-eyed boy raised an eyebrow in confusion. Weren't they supposed to be sending his account information? He turned parchment over, and glanced at the back which was blank as well, then turned it back over and sucked in a startled breath. The watermark had moved, and was looking directly at him. "Key, please," it said.

Harry blinked and stared for a couple of seconds before blurting, "What?"

"This letter contains privileged information. Your identity must be verified." the little picture explained tersely before repeating, "Key please."

"Erm...yeah. Right. Just a moment," Harry laid the letter down on the bed, and fetched his vault key from his trunk. He retrieved the parchment, and held his key in front of the watermark. "Here it is."

"Oh, yes. Griphook did say you were new at this." The goblin on the paper pointed up at the letterhead. "Lay your key on the silhouette."

Harry obeyed, and watched torn between fascination and horror as his key was drawn into the letter. The little watermark was holding the key now, and glancing between it and a piece of parchment it had retrieved from somewhere. "Yes, yes," he muttered distractedly. "Everything seems to be in order." He tossed the key up and to Harry's immense relief, it re-appeared where he had put it. "Good day, Mr. Potter," the little goblin said with a polite incline of his head, before vanishing from sight. In his place, the parchment started to fill with rows and columns of figures.

Harry scanned the numbers as they filled in, raising his eyebrows, and letting out a low whistle of surprise. Whoa! he thought, unable to find the words to form a more articulate response. There was more in his vault than he thought. His parents had deposited a fair amount when they had started the account, and set up an agreement with the bank so that it earned an aggressive rate of return. There were stipulations, of course. For example, the money had to remain untouched, and completely at the bank's disposal for a minimum of 10 years. Afterwards, only a fixed number of withdrawals per year would be allowed. Deposits would be allowed at any time, of course. The account had grown impressively over the past decade, fed by the interest it earned until he had started Hogwarts. No wonder the currency he took out for school on his annual trips to Diagon Alley never seemed to matter. He earned that and more in interest every year.

Of course, the account as it existed currently wasn't practical for everyday life. It was earning a lot of interest, yes, but the strict rules on the number and amount of withdrawals he was allowed in a year would be horribly inconvenient once he graduated. Harry reckoned he would eventually need to set up the equivalent of a muggle checking account when he had an actual residence, and regular day-to-day expenses, but that could wait for now. Still slightly stunned, he carefully re-folded his account statement, and put it, and his Gringotts key back in his trunk.

That done, Harry sat on the floor by his trunk, and leaned against it, still trying to assimilate all the information he had just read. A glance at his clock told him he still had a while before he was expected anywhere. He was just beginning to wonder what to do with himself, and was thinking about nipping down for a spot of lunch, when his attention was caught by the box he'd brought with him from Mrs. Figg's house. It been sitting on the floor beside his dresser. Now it slid over to him, and bumped him on the hip with a palpable air of, Well, is it my turn? Are you finally going to pay attention to me?

Harry wondered for a minute if he had truly lost it, then decided the box must be charmed somehow. Well, okay, he already knew that. The thing practically ripped with magic when touched, it had emerged

looking brand new even after being drenched by rain and puddle water, and it had spontaneously hidden the label that so obviously declared his identity when Stan Shunpike had loaded and unloaded his things on the Knight Bus. "Okay," he told it finally. "Sorry. I was just waiting to hear back from Mrs. Figg."

The box did a happy little spin, then untied and untaped itself, flinging its flaps open wide. Harry chuckled a little, then peered in.

The box contained a hodgepodge of items. It appeared to mostly be full of papers, but there were other things inside as well. Reaching a hand in, Harry drew out some official looking papers--his muggle school records, his medical records, his birth certificate... Yep, he really was Harry James Potter. The teen had been asked, and often wondered himself if "Harry" was short for anything. Evidently not.

Laying these aside he slipped his hand in deeper, and pulled out a slightly charred parchment envelope addressed to Mr. H. Potter, Cupboard under the Stairs?? Harry shook his head in disbelief. His first Hogwarts letter! But how? Uncle Vernon had burned it! He had kept the letter Hagrid had finally hand-delivered to him, addressed to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea, but he'd always regretted the loss of that first letter. It was the first indication he'd ever had that someone other than his aunt and uncle knew he existed--and now here it was! A little toasted, maybe, but mostly intact. He carefully removed the letter and looked over it, before gently laying it aside with his other legal papers.

He reached into the box again, even deeper this time, and pulled out a handful of assignments he'd done at his old muggle school. I don't understand! Harry thought in stunned disbelief. Aunt Petunia threw all my things away! She only kept Dudley's papers! How in the world did Mrs. Figg get them? Flipping through the stack, he grinned at the subject matter, the little notes his teachers had written, and his own childish handwriting and artwork. One drawing in particular caught his attention. He had drawn a motorcycle and rider silhouetted against the moon. "Charming! Great imagination!" his teacher had noted, writing carefully near the top of the paper. Harry looked critically at the drawing. It wasn't bad, really, but its existence defied logic. His

aunt and uncle always treated his schoolwork with indifference, sparing it one short look before tossing it in the bin, but because this drawing was "imaginative" they had ripped it to pieces before throwing it out. How then, was it in the box from Mrs. Figg's house, looking as though it had never been torn?

Harry shook his head in amazement, and decided not to worry about the "how" just yet. For the next half hour or so, he explored the wonders hidden in the seemingly bottomless box. One of the more poignant items he unearthed was a book of fairy tales that he had won one day at school. Dudley had been home with the flu, so he'd actually had the nerve to do his best at the little trivia quiz his teacher was hosting. The book had been first prize. He had sneaked it into the house, and managed to keep it hidden in his cupboard for quite a while, but Petunia had run across it one day, and flown into a rage. She had yelled almost hysterically about how such rubbish wasn't allowed in her house, and rapped him smartly with the book, before tearing a handful of pages out of it, and throwing it into the kitchen bin.

Grinning happily, Harry had been ready to flop on the bed and take in a tale or two, when his little clock chimed. Time to Go, it read. "Oh, hang it," the wizard muttered in irritation, "I forgot to get lunch!" He placed the book beside the clock and shrugged. At least I have a plan for later, he thought, hurrying down the stairs. Perhaps he had time to make a quick sandwich, or at least grab a piece of fruit before heading over to Madam Malkin's.

A full dozen cats looked up disinterestedly when the fireplace at Magnolia Crescent blazed, and their mistress came tumbling out. "Finally," Arabella grumbled, brushing herself off, and dropping her bags on the floor. She tromped to her very unlived in kitchen, and scowled into her nearly empty refrigerator. Eurgh. Definitely nothing edible there. Arabella cast a banishing charm and a cleaning charm in rapid succession. Well, there was her reason to go fetch Harry. Petunia had allowed her to "borrow" the boy to help her carry groceries home from the shops before, and she was literally out of everything.

Brightening, she shed her robes, revealing the muggle clothes she wore underneath, snatched up a few shopping bags, and hurried out the door. As she walked two streets over to Privet Drive, she rehearsed what she would say: "Petunia, dear, how lovely to see you! Is Harry available to help me do a little job by any chance?"

As she neared #4, she noticed there were more than the usual number of cars about. Frowning, Arabella walked a little more quickly, then smiled in relief when she spotted a dark-haired figure in the yard. He seemed okay...taller than when she had last seen him, but that was to be expected. She was about to call him over to her, but a group of people exiting the house made her stop, and listen instead.

"As you can see, this is a very comfortably sized house," a smartly dressed woman with a clipboard was saying to an unfamiliar couple. "Easy access to shops, quiet neighborhood, good schools..." she listed, pointing out the benefits of living on Privet Drive while the couple listened politely. Noticing his parents had exited the house, the boy ran over to them.

Mrs. Figg watched as the realtor and her perspective clients spoke a few minutes more. When the family climbed into their car and drove away, she cautiously approached the other woman. "Excuse me, do you happen to know what became of the family who used to live here?"

The realtor turned with a surprised smile, "Friends of yours?"

Arabella shrugged. "They have me babysit for them from time to time," she said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I was just popping 'round to see if one of their boys could help me with an errand."

"One of their boys? I thought they just had one," the other woman frowned as she marked something on her clipboard, then faced Arabella. "The father was transferred with his job, that's all I know. They're using another agent to find their home on the other end."

Arabella nodded. She chatted with the agent for a few more minutes, then the woman got into her car and drove away. The witch waited until her companion had driven a few blocks, then hurried to the edge

of the anti-apparation wards, checked for possible witnesses, and apparated for her house. Something really weird was going on here...

Chapter 11 - Harry Hunting, Anyone?

Saturday, July 15, 1995

Once she was clear of the wards surrounding the Dursley's former residence on Privet Drive, Arabella Figg apparated, materializing in her own living room. Once there, her eyes quickly sought out the locator clock. Harry's hand had moved at some point, and was now pointing to "Unknown."

Belle narrowed her eyes at the device. How could this be? It doesn't make sense! she thought dazedly. Harry had been at #4 Privet Drive the night of July 1st--that much she knew. What had changed? The witch racked her brain, trying to recall any possible clues. She had seen Petunia briefly at one of the local shops a few days before Sirius and Remus had appeared on her doorstep. It had been a chance meeting, and their conversation had been brief and bland for the most part. Harry's aunt had mentioned something about Vernon and an exciting new job opportunity, though...and the realtor mentioned a transfer.

She just hadn't said exactly where.

Mrs. Figg sighed, and pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes as she did so. Come on, old girl. Think! You're no good to Harry like this. Taking a deep breath, she held it a few seconds, then let it out slowly. Feeling a little more centered, she considered the clock again. It was as it had been the night he was due back from Hogwarts. Harry wasn't where he was supposed to be, true, but at the same time, he wasn't in any real danger. As long as his hand stayed away from, oh, say, "Mortal Peril" she had time.

Irritably, she re-cast the spell that would alert her if Harry's hand moved, vowing it would stay active until she knew exactly where her young charge was. Idiot, she fumed angrily. She knew better than to trust appearances--especially now that the truth about Peter Pettigrew had come to light. She should have verified Harry's whereabouts before leaving for America.

Walking over to where she kept her telephone, she picked up her phone book and began flipping through the section that listed business numbers. Perhaps she could get a clue from Grunnings, the drill-making firm Vernon had been a director in ever since she'd known him.

Arabella frowned as she worked. This was unusual behavior for a man who usually clung very tightly to established routines and schedules. The Dursleys were nothing if not predictable, and Vernon especially, highly resented anything (or anyone) that deviated from the norm. The idea that they would suddenly pack up and move away should have been laughable.

Finally locating what she was looking for, the witch dialed the number, and waited for someone to answer.

"Good afternoon, this is Grunnings Drills, how may I direct your call?"

"Good afternoon," Arabella responded politely. "I would like to speak with Mr. Vernon Dursley, please."

"One moment, please."

Arabella found herself listening to "on hold" music. While she waited, she calmed herself slightly. The Dursleys probably moved to a neighboring village, or maybe even to London. At any rate it wasn't the first time Harry's clock hand had pointed to "Unknown."

The "on hold" music was starting to repeat itself, but the old witch found she didn't mind too much. If nothing else, the annoying little tunes and ad slogans for Grunnings reassured her that the connection hadn't been broken. Absently, she wondered what was taking so long. Was Vernon not at work today?

Drumming her fingers on the table, Arabella thought back to two...no three summers ago now. Right before Harry's second year. Oh, dear what a mess that had been! The only useful information that had come out of that fiasco was how inefficient their plan of action was.

The proximity wards, that warned her of another witch or wizard in the area had gone off in the middle of the night, rudely waking her. Soon after, alarms sounded, indicating the house itself had been breached. Similar alarms had been placed at Hogwarts, and the Ministry. Arabella had been forced to waste a few precious minutes waiting for her backup to show up, because they wouldn't know the way to Harry's house.

Arabella had found it odd that although a full compliment of Aurors was supposed to be dispatched immediately, only Professor Dumbledore had shown up. He was sleepy and rumpled looking, but had his wand out and ready.

They had waited a few more minutes before heading over to Privet Drive, and got there just in time to see Harry waving out the window to the Dursleys, and calling "See you next summer!" as a turquoise and white Ford Anglia banked gracefully, then disappeared into the night.

The Dursleys were all but hanging out one of the upstairs windows, presumably seeing him off.

Acting quickly, before the car got too far away, Mrs. Figg had fired a tracking charm. "I've got them!" she whispered excitedly to the aged wizard at her side. "We can follow them easily once we get dressed." She had turned, meaning to hurry back to her house, but Dumbledore stayed put, a bemused expression on his face.

"I had not considered this," Albus had muttered distractedly, "though why I cannot say..."

"What?" Arabella asked, watching as Harry's family shut the window and went back inside.

The Hogwarts headmaster smiled then, blue eyes twinkling. "It seems young has Harry decided to go visiting this summer. I do believe those were the Weasleys who collected him."

"Arthur Weasley?"

"His sons, apparently," Dumbledore said, nodding. "Arthur usually goes calling at a more civilized hour."

Arabella smiled, remembering the gales of laughter that had floated down from the car's open window as it sped away, then grimaced. She still cringed when she thought about the delays she had experienced getting to Privet Drive. Harry could have been killed five times over before she and Albus managed to get there had he actually been under attack. It was a case of a plan looking good on paper, but failing miserably when actually put into practice.

Of course they hadn't actually thought it would be necessary, Harry was well hidden, after all, but looking back, she couldn't believe they'd been so careless. A simple dry run would have uncovered the inefficiencies and flaws, but no one had bothered.

Belle glanced over at her clock again. It had been sitting on "Unknown" that night as well. Dumbledore had stayed until they knew Harry was safe, making tea, and re-planning their actions in the event of an attack, and helping her modify her locator clock. They had changed the spot that referred to Harry's old muggle school to "Burrow/With the Weasleys." That way the house was covered, as well as any outings Harry went on. His hand would move to that spot whether he was with one Weasley, or several.

During his second school year, Harry's clock hand had seemed quite confused. Between his friendship with Ron, and his position on the Quidditch team, Harry was "With the Weasleys" quite a bit. Seeing this, Arabella had further modified the "Burrow/Weasley" location to mean "away from Hogwarts." The clock hand had immediately settled down after that, never moving from "Hogwarts." That had been satisfactory though third year. Well, except for the two weeks he'd been on Diagon Alley.

Arabella chuckled lightly in spite of herself. Everyone had been so worried--afraid he'd run afoul of Sirius Black! She'd considered adding Diagon Alley to the clock, then dismissed it as unnecessary. Harry had had the entire Alley looking after him that summer, and she was far more concerned with the hunt for Black. Besides, he was generally "With the Weasleys" when he went, and the clock face was

getting rather full, so the addition of Diagon Alley seemed rather superfluous.

She had noticed a little fluctuation during Harry's third year between "Hogwarts" and "With the Weasleys" which she had assumed were Hogsmeade weekends. Fourth year she had added "Hogsmeade." Harry had evidently visited the wizarding village without his trusty partner in crime, and his clock hand slid over to "Unknown" again. Harry and Ron Weasley evidently had a bit of a falling out during the fall of fourth year, but by all appearances things were back on track before Christmas. Harry's clock hand became confused again, and she'd had to modify the "Hogsmeade" setting.

She'd had a few anxious minutes at the end of the year when the clock hand had swivelled around to "Traveling," when he and Cedric touched the TriWizard Cup, then to "Mortal Peril," when they landed. Arabella closed her eyes a moment. Thank heavens Barty Crouch had used the "round-trip" portkey charm when he'd enchanted the trophy. If he'd used one of the more sophisticated one-way charms, Harry would have been trapped, with no obvious way back to Hogwarts.

"Ma'am?" the operator was finally back on the line.

"Yes?" Mrs. Figg responded quickly, opening her eyes, and returning her attention to the phone.

"Mr. Dursley has been transferred, ma'am. He's not at our London office at this time."

Arabella blinked in surprise. "What?" she finally managed.

"Grunnings has been doing quite well the last few years," the lady she was speaking to explained. "So we have been opening new offices, here in Britain, and abroad. Mr. Dursley was offered the opportunity to oversee the building, staffing, and initial operations of one of the new manufacturing complexes."

"Oh, yes. I remember hearing something along those lines," Mrs. Figg said, recalling her conversation with Petunia. "Which office will he be working for now?"

"Mr. Dursley chose the Australian site."

"Australia? How long will he be there?" the witch asked, aghast.

"These assignments are typically three to five years in duration, ma'am." The woman on the phone paused a moment, then added, "Mr. Dursley's local clients have been divided amongst the other members of our staff. If I could have your name, I will find out who has taken over your account."

"Oh. No. I'm not a client of Mr. Dursley's. I'm a neighbor. I found out today his house was for sale, and...noticed he had forgotten something," Arabella improvised. "I've been away myself, and didn't realize they'd moved. Could I have his new address so I could send it to him?" she asked hopefully.

"No, ma'am. We aren't allowed to give out personal information on the phone. If you'd like, you can drop off or send whatever you have to the London office, and we can forward it to him."

"Oh. Yes, of course. That would be lovely," Arabella replied. Sensing the other woman was about to end the conversation, she tried to get a little more information. "Just out of interest, where will your new Australian offices be located? If I can be frank, I'm really rather surprised they didn't tell me they'd be moving."

Surprisingly, the secretary's professional mask slipped a bit. "Mr. Dursley will be heading up a new manufacturing and distribution complex in Perth," she supplied. "I expect he and Mrs. Dursley will be sending out address change notifications shortly. They weren't originally scheduled to move until closer to the end of summer. I don't know the exact circumstances, but something came up, and they changed their plans."

"Do you happen to know how long they've been gone?" Mrs. Figg pressed.

"Not long--a week or two at most. Don't worry, dear. I'm sure they'll be in touch once they get themselves sorted out. Will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you. You've been a great help." Belle wore pensive frown as she hung up the telephone. Harry was in Australia? How on earth was he supposed to get back to Hogwarts? Surely Dumbledore wasn't planning to transfer him to another magical school!

Arabella scowled, and began to pace. Every now and then she glanced at her clock, but Harry's hand remained steadfastly on "Unknown."

Nothing about this entire scenario made sense. She'd never met a couple, muggle or magical that were more set in their ways than Vernon and Petunia Dursley. She could possibly see them moving to another house, maybe a larger one in a more upscale neighborhood. If there was one thing Petunia loved more than routine and order it was status. But the idea of them picking up suddenly, and just moving out of the country would be laughable if it wasn't obviously true.

What was the motivation? Money? Status? A chance for promotion? And what of Harry's schooling? And Dudley's? Vernon and Petunia had gone on for ages about how happy they were that their boy was attending Smeltings. Surely there were closer assignments that would allow the boys to continue attending their current schools.

Was it something else, then?

The Dursley's behavior with regard to Harry had always been a little odd. Arabella had noticed it for the first time when she had "met" Petunia one morning in early November, just a few days after the Potters had been killed.

That had been a carefully orchestrated affair, but by the end of the visit, Petunia was comfortable enough around her that she had accepted when Arabella had offered to mind the boys at any time. Thinking back, Belle absently noted that although she had watched Harry often, Petunia had only left Dudley in her care a few times--

generally on the infrequent occasions when Harry had needed to see the pediatrician, or the optometrist.

The witch shuddered delicately, and thanked her lucky stars for young Potter's good health. The two boys were as different as night and day. Harry she could deal with easily. Dudley was enough to drive a wooden man crazy.

The initial contact had been successful, and everything seemed to be going as well as could be expected. Harry was quieter than she remembered, but seemed all right. Petunia doted on Dudley outrageously, which Mrs. Figg found worrisome, but it had only been a few days. They (herself included) were still very early in the grieving process, and to be fair, Dudley had been Petunia's only concern until a few short days ago. Perhaps the Dursleys still needed time to adjust to Harry's presence in their household.

As she'd left, she had noticed a box out with the rest of the Dursley's rubbish. Belle wasn't the nosy sort, and wasn't generally disposed to flashes of premonition, but something just didn't seem right. She had been shocked, when she'd sneaked a look, after making sure she wasn't being observed. It was James and Lily's last effects, delivered to Harry from the Ministry of Magic--the few precious items which had salvaged intact from the wreckage of their home, as well as some news clippings, including James and Lily's obituaries.

Without a second thought, she had shrunk the box and pocketed it, deciding Petunia must still be distraught over her sister's death, and not thinking clearly. Perhaps the memories were too painful, or she was regretting the rift that had grown between Lily and herself. Why else would she toss out Harry's only link to his past?

Deciding preventative action was necessary, at least until Petunia came to her senses, Arabella had returned that evening, sneaking unnoticed under the cover of darkness. She surreptitiously fired some charms through the kitchen window while the family was eating dinner, once again troubled by the rather stilted way Harry was treated. If Vernon and Petunia threw anything out that had anything to do with any of the Potters, they would be compelled to throw it in the kitchen bin. The bin, she bewitched with recognition, repairing and

cleaning charms, then made it a highly specialized portkey. Any of Harry's belongings that were thrown into that bin would be restored to like-new condition, and automatically transferred to the box, which she had already fitted with expansion and lightening charms.

Arabella stopped pacing and looked up suddenly in alarm. I never removed those charms! Heavens, what that box must contain! I'll have to clean all the rubbish out of it before I give it to Harry. She scanned her living room, then frowned in confusion. She was almost certain she had fetched the box down from the attic before Sirius and Remus showed up, meaning to give it to the boy when he returned from Hogwarts, but it didn't seem to be around. Perhaps she just meant to get it down. No matter. She could sort that out later, once young Mr. Potter's whereabouts were verified.

Shaking her head impatiently, Arabella Figg strode over to the fireplace, completely overlooking Harry's note which the cats had knocked onto the floor. "Hogwarts!" she commanded, tossing a handful of floo powder into her hearth.

"Easy...easy...just a little more...yes, I believe that does it," Arthur Weasley said encouragingly, as he and Molly worked to enclose his shed with protective spells, and integrate it into the collective whole that surrounded the Burrow and the property it stood on. They'd learned fairly quickly how to conjure, then gently stretch the magical protection to cover the required area, although sometimes they still tore it. No, the hardest part was joining two or more pieces together. Molly had compared it to trying to work with satin. Making smooth, even seams with no holes, tears, or slippage was harder than one might think, and different with every person. No wonder the Aurors who did this all the time tended to stay with the same partners and teams.

Molly nodded wearily, and arched her back, stretching the tense muscles, and making her spine pop in a few places. Leaning against Arthur's work bench, she idly picked up a battery, and shook her head fondly. "I don't suppose I could convince you to clean out some of this muggle rubbish?"

Arthur shrugged, and looked around. "Perhaps I might be persuaded to part with some of it," he hedged. "But not all of it," he finished, staring moodily out of the small window.

His wife raised astonished eyebrows at the first part of his statement, then moved closer and slid her arms around his waist when she noticed his tired and apprehensive body language. "It will work out," she said gently.

"Yes, I know," he responded, resting his chin on the top of her head, and pulling her close. "I just feel a bit overextended right now."

Molly said nothing, just began rubbing his back. Arthur closed his eyes, and allowed himself to relax a bit, as her hands moved in slow circles, easing the knotted tension in the muscles of his lower back.

"Mum? Dad?"

The elder Weasleys exchanged a rueful smile, and one last hug, before separating. "Never a dull moment," Molly observed, before calling, "In here, Ron."

Ron and Ginny entered the shed, a few seconds later, each carrying two glasses of lemonade. "Ginny made this," Ron said without preamble. "We thought you might like some."

"How lovely, dear!" Molly smiled, accepting a glass from her daughter, and taking a deep swallow. "Oh, Ginny! This is delicious!" she told her smiling, blushing daughter. "And aren't you the thoughtful ones to bring it out here," she said fondly ruffling her son's hair.

"So, how's it going?" Ron asked, in what he hoped was a casual manner after they'd sipped their drinks for a few minutes in silence. He and Ginny had been snapped at quite a few times during the last couple of weeks by their parents and oldest brothers because of their almost constant queries about their progress. It had been especially bad in the beginning, when everyone had been making annoying, frustrating mistakes.

Molly sighed when she saw the apprehension in her children's eyes. "I think we're almost done in here," she said calmly, then slanted her husband a teasing look, "unless your father decides to begin sorting through his collection tonight."

"Actually," Arthur said, frowning into a shadowed corner, "I don't recognize this." He rummaged around in the corner for a minute, and came out with a set of bars.

"Oh," Ron said, with a look of surprised recognition. "I'd almost forgotten those."

"Ronald," his mother said seriously, "Please don't tell me that you've begun collecting muggle rubbish as well."

Her son shook his head. "No, it's nothing like that. Those are Harry's."

"Harry's?!"

"Well, they belong to his uncle, actually," Ron amended. He took in his parents' and sister's dumbstruck expressions, and shrugged. "They're from summer before second year," he explained, keeping a wary eye on his mother for signs of an impending explosion. "You know, when Fred and George and I took Dad's flying car to Surrey." When his family continued to gape at him, Ron grew irritated. "What? We told you he had bars on his window, remember?"

Dumbly, Molly nodded, thinking back to that summer morning while Arthur and Ginny looked on aghast.

They were starving him Mum! There were bars on his window!

Molly began to feel ill. At the time, she had assumed that this was yet another cock-and-bull story dreamed up by her twin sons. Harry had been a little thin, true, and she hadn't liked the vibes she picked up from his uncle at Kings Cross Station, but Harry had been thin since she'd known him, and he hadn't seemed maladjusted or horribly mistreated. In fact he'd fit right in to life in her household, and hadn't been any trouble at all. "Yes, I remember," she said faintly, horror

dawning in her eyes. "I thought your brothers were embellishing the facts again. I never dreamed..."

Arthur, meanwhile, looked furious and had turned very red, remembering his own interaction with the Dursley family the previous summer. He asked Ron to tell him exactly what happened, and his son had obliged, describing how he had become worried when Harry hadn't answered his letters, and sought his brothers' advice. The sky had been cloudy, so they had decided to fetch Harry, and pretend he had shown up in the night. Ron had stopped, and shrugged sheepishly at this, then resumed.

They'd found Harry locked in his room. He'd been there for three days, and had only been let out twice a day to use the restroom. His muggle relatives had been feeding him small amounts of food through a cat flap in his door. His Hogwarts things had been locked in a cupboard under the stairs. Fred and George had been forced to pick the locks on Harry's bedroom door and the cupboard, after they'd literally ripped the bars off his bedroom window. Ron had hoisted the bars into the car, and they'd brought them along, not knowing what else to do with them.

"So this is why you've been so anxious for Harry to come to the Burrow," Arthur stated flatly.

"Yes, sir," Ron said meekly.

"And the food we sent last summer? He wasn't really just missing my cooking, was he?"

Stricken, Ron shrugged, and suddenly found his shoelaces very interesting. When Harry had written last summer with news of Dudley's diet, Ron had assumed he just hadn't wanted to live on vegetables all summer, and was craving a little variety. It had never crossed his mind that his friend might not be getting enough to eat.

Arthur met his wife's tearful gaze, then nodded grimly. "I think a visit to Hogwarts is in order," he stated, in a remarkably calm voice, leading his family back to the Burrow.

Albus Dumbledore sighed sadly as he made his way back to his office from the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. Remus Lupin's transformation on the 12th had been especially bad. Even with the Wolfsbane Potion, he was still recovering two days later. Sirius Black had portkeyed them both to Hogwarts as soon as Remus was no longer a danger, and he'd been under Poppy Pomphrey's watchful eye ever since.

Of course, that would change, and soon, if the werewolf had his way.

"Ice mice," he said to the gargoyle who guarded the entrance to his office. As he climbed up the spiral stairway, Dumbledore wondered briefly when Fawkes would be back. The firebird had been his companion for many years now, and Albus found himself missing the phoenix's presence.

As he entered his office, and made his way over to his desk, his attention was caught by a now familiar sound.

Ping! Ping! Ping! Ping! Someone, or several someones were sending reports. Curiously, he let his gaze roam along the neat stacks of parchment lined on his desk, stopping in delighted surprise when he came to the parchment he'd set up "just in case." Young Harry was reporting. A lot. Four pages worth, in fact.

The Headmaster raised an eyebrow as he perused the boy's parchment. Harry explained that he had been keeping notes since he realized what was happening, and he'd been waiting for Hedwig to return so he could send them on. Albus smiled. Good lad. Harry had obviously proven himself to Fawkes as well, since he was using the charmed parchment and quills. Excellent.

Scanning the letter, Dumbledore rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Some of the information Harry reported he already knew, but there was quite a bit that he did not. Severus and the rest of the Death Eaters, for example had not been aware that Voldemort had gone through a period of weakness just after his rebirth.

Dumbledore's eyebrows drew together in concentration as he read: Voldemort was taking advantage of the Minister's current idiocy and laying low. Possible attack on Privet Drive? Snape's potion would presumably be administered to Peter Pettigrew within the next 48 - 72 hours. Voldemort still hated muggles, muggleborns, and half-bloods as much as he ever did. Arthur Weasley and Amos Diggory mentioned by name by Lucius Malfoy? Malfoy also mentioned that Fudge had refused to allow Aurors to ward the Burrow. Hmm. Arthur and Amos must be warned to be especially vigilant. He flipped through the report, amazed at the wealth of information it contained. This connection of Harry's could prove invaluable, provided it wasn't having a negative effect on his health.

Skimming quickly over Harry's correspondence, Albus searched specifically for any responses the boy may have made to the questions he was asked about his scar, or his connection. Most of the parchment was filled with dreams, impressions, and overheard snatches of conversation, but finally, after he finished copying his notes, Harry had begun to hesitantly pass on some thoughts and theories of his own.

According to Harry, his scar had not been bothering him overmuch...yet. By the way he described his connection, Albus was sure that it would--once Voldemort decided to come out of hiding. The boy was evidently protected from scar pains and visions to a certain extent by the dark wizard's current inactivity. It wouldn't last forever, though. By all indications, in this report, and in others he had received, Voldemort was planning something big. The intelligence he was receiving seemed to indicate the dark forces were gearing up for an attack. Specifically, an attack against Harry Potter.

Albus blew his breath out through his teeth, and massaged his temples. If this kept up, Harry might be well advised to cease his summer employment. Additional wards and spells might not be a bad idea either. He would contact Arabella later, and seek her input. He certainly didn't wish to imprison Harry in his uncle's house, but he shuddered to think what Voldemort and his Death Eaters might do to the boy if he fell into their clutches again.

Re-focusing on the last piece of parchment, Albus read the last bit, then blinked and read it again. It was a small paragraph, just a few sentences, but it shocked the old wizard as few things had in recent history. The wonder of it was, Harry had added it casually. Almost like an afterthought:

I guess that's all I have to report sir, I hope you find the information useful. Oh, and one other thing...my aunt and uncle have sold their property on Privet Drive. The house is currently vacant. If Voldemort is planning to attack me there, I'm afraid he'll be disappointed.

Yours Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Before Albus had time to recover from this little bombshell, he heard the babble of raised, excited voices outside his door, then someone firmly hammered on it.

"Come in," he called, rising, and observing as Arthur Weasley, Arabella Figg, Severus Snape, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin all but tumbled into his office. Arabella was waving a piece of parchment around, and Arthur was brandishing something that looked like a small metal garden gate. Sirius and Remus looked furious, and Snape looked very put out.

When the tumult finally died down to a manageable level, Albus sank back into his chair, and conjured a few more so everyone had a place to sit. When everyone had taken a seat, the headmaster folded his hands on top of his desk and studied his guests. "So, what can I help you with?"

Chapter 12 - What We Have Here Is A Failure To Communicate...

Saturday, July 15, 1995

Albus Dumbledore had a certain reputation for omniscience in the British magical community, and the world at large. Even before his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald, he had been well known for his magical strength, keen intellect, and meticulous attention to detail. There was just some intangible something about him that inspired confidence. Perhaps it was the way he always seemed to know what went on around him, or the way he could usually zero in on the cause of a problem. Perhaps it was his customary good humor and unflappable attitude. Perhaps it was his half-moon glasses and appreciation of chamber music and tenpin bowling. Whatever it was, it had earned him a great deal of fame and respect. People tended to breathe sighs of relief and feel an almost childish sense of confidence that everything would be all right when Albus Dumbledore took things in hand.

Albus was flattered by the trust in him, but privately considered it a bit excessive. He freely admitted that he was far from perfect or infallible, but the truth remained that he was an exceptional wizard. Most of the time the magical community's trust was well placed. Most of the time, he could be counted on to make the right decision, choose the proper course of action, and discover any errors that had been made.

Most of the time.

Probably a good 90 - 95% of the time.

But not always.

Formidable as he was, Albus Dumbledore was not immune to the occasional slip-up or oversight.

Unfortunately, people tend to react poorly, and be irrationally unforgiving when their heroes dare to show that they are indeed human.

The Hogwarts Headmaster surveyed his glaring guests with carefully masked unease. "So, what can I help you with?" he asked pleasantly, hoping to dispel some of the tension. By the looks of things, he might soon have a small riot on his hands.

Silence stretched out in response to his query, until Arabella broke it. Rising from her chair, she put the parchment she was holding down on Albus' desk. It was a status sheet, Albus noted. Harry Potter, Status: Unknown. Unknown??!

"Harry's aunt and uncle have left Privet Drive," she stiffly announced, when Dumbledore's startled blue eyes sought hers. Ignoring the shocked gasps from Sirius, Remus, and Arthur, she continued, "I called Grunnings Drills, his uncle's place of employment. They said Vernon accepted a position in Australia!" How could you have allowed this to happen! her body language shouted. Why didn't you know?!

Sirius opened his mouth to protest Harry's removal from Britain, but Arthur beat him to it, startling everyone with his vehemence. "No, Albus, that is absolutely unacceptable! Harry must come to the Burrow immediately, and legal action must be taken to remove him from those muggles' care!" Rising to stand next to Arabella, he gestured to the "garden gate" he had brought with him. "Summer of '92, that foul excuse of an uncle barricaded him in his room! These bars were fitted over his window, and they underfed him as well!"

Albus' face darkened like a thundercloud, as the suspicions he'd had about Harry a few days ago came rushing back. Damn! He'd allowed himself to be distracted by the boy's news about his scar connection, and he hadn't pursued the matter as he'd intended. "Why are you just now telling me this?" he demanded, amazed that Arthur Weasley would keep something this important to himself.

Arthur sighed heavily, and ran a weary hand down his face. "Because I just found out myself," he said, his voice thick with anger and self-reproach. "I feel like an idiot!" he snarled, causing Sirius and Remus to exchange nervous looks. Weasley was usually rather calm and mild-mannered. What on earth had set him off?

"Perhaps you should back up, and start at the beginning," Dumbledore suggested gently, gesturing for Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Figg to return to their seats while the others nodded their agreement.

"Very well," Arthur said, dropping back into his seat between Remus and Arabella. He paused a moment to gather his thoughts, then began.

"I suppose the natural starting point is September first, 1991. Molly and Ginny had seen the boys off on the Hogwarts Express. They also met Harry Potter, and directed him to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. I wasn't able to accompany them the train station that year, but I heard all about it when I got home that evening," Arthur said, smiling indulgently as he remembered his daughter's sparkling brown eyes and bright smile. Mum told him how to get onto the platform, Dad, but I wished him luck!

"Ginny was so excited she forgot to be sad that all her brothers were off at school. Molly was a little preoccupied, though," Arthur continued, ignoring Snape's indelicate snort. "When I asked, she shrugged and said it was probably nothing, but now that she'd had a chance to think about it there were several things about Harry she found odd. He was unaccompanied, he hadn't been told how to get onto the platform, and his appearance wasn't what one might expect. She was especially surprised by his taped glasses, and worn, baggy clothes." Arthur said, ticking off the points on his fingers.

"We talked it over and decided Harry's muggle family must be hurting financially. It didn't completely explain things, but it was the only solution we could think of, and something we could certainly sympathize with. Even Ron noticed. He mentioned in a letter that Harry never got mail from home, and asked Molly if she would please include something for him when she sent the annual Christmas parcel. We found that odd, but thought perhaps the muggles were having difficulty or didn't want to learn how to utilize owl post. We always had some explanation." Arthur paused here, face flushing angrily. "I found out last summer when I went to fetch Harry, that those muggles are very comfortable. I'd even say well off."

As she listened to Arthur's tale, a horrible suspicion was beginning to form in Arabella's mind. Since she babysat Harry quite often while he was growing up, she'd made it a point to get him some small treat for the holidays. Petunia generally left Harry with her at least once as the holiday neared, which suited Belle just fine. It gave her the opportunity to give the boy his present without having to get one for his brat of a cousin. Her gifts were never large or extravagant: some cookies or sweets (Harry especially fancied Mars Bars), a small box of crayons, a picture book, or some inexpensive plastic toy. They were nothing, really, but Harry always acted like she'd presented him with the world on a plate. He generally reciprocated with a drawing or craft he made at school.

She hadn't given him anything for the last few years, because she was supposed to be posing as a muggle, and as such wouldn't know of Hogwarts. Dear God, were her pitiful offerings the only Christmas presents the boy had? No, that couldn't be right. She wouldn't let it be right! "Are you saying he didn't get anything from the Dursleys?" she asked weakly.

"They sent him a bit of muggle money first year," Arthur supplied grimly. "50p, I believe. Ronald was fascinated by it, so Harry let him have it. I remember because Ron showed it to me when he returned to the Burrow for the summer holidays."

Mrs. Figg was looking a little pale, so Arthur gave her a reassuring smile. "He receives gifts from his friends, and Molly always makes it a point to include him when she sends the Christmas package to our lot. It's not much, but he always writes her a nice note, and makes sure to thank her again when she meets the train at the end of term."

"Yes," Belle said faintly, "he was always very appreciative of the little gifts I gave him as well."

Arthur nodded, then frowned a little as he got back on track. "The summer before Ron and Harry's second year, Ron asked Molly for permission to invite Harry over for a visit, and she agreed almost immediately. She hadn't been impressed with Vernon Dursley at all when she'd seen him at Kings Cross.

"Ron wrote to Harry several times, but he never responded." Arthur paused as though working through something, then shrugged. "I didn't think much of it at the time. Maybe something had come up. Maybe he'd changed his mind. Maybe he was slow about answering his mail. They were only twelve after all, and at the time I thought Harry must have a wonderful home life. Even if they didn't have material wealth, I was certain his family must love him very dearly.

"Then one morning in early August, I came home from an absolutely exhausting night at work, and found an extra person in my household. Ron and the twins had gotten worried about Harry, so they crept out of bed and fetched him from Surrey using a muggle car I was tinkering with. I found these in my shed this afternoon," Arthur said, indicating the bars with a look of extreme distaste. He raked a hand through his thinning red hair then proceeded to tell how his sons had rescued Harry after discovering him barricaded in his room. When he finished, even Snape looked faintly shocked.

"So how exactly did the bars come into your possession, Arthur?" Albus asked curiously.

"Ron said they left in a bit of a hurry, so they just brought them along. Evidently they woke Harry's family, and his uncle was none too pleased. The boys didn't want Molly to know they'd been out of course, so they stashed the bars in my shed when they got back to the Burrow." Arthur stopped a minute, and flushed slightly. "I have a fair amount of clutter in my shed, so this wasn't difficult. The boys were planning to tell Molly that Harry had 'shown up in the night,' but she was too quick for them. She'd noticed they were gone, and was waiting for them when they got back."

"Was she indeed?" Dumbledore asked, smiling in spite of himself at the mental image. Molly Weasley could be quite intimidating when she chose.

"Oh, quite," Arthur said, with a rueful grin of his own. "She was livid of course. The boys tried to tell her that Harry and Hedwig were caged and half starved, but she wasn't having any of it. At the time, she assumed it was another wild tale the twins made up, and you can't really blame her. About half of what they say is rubbish. Anyway, after

she scolded the lot of them, she took them in and started breakfast. The whole thing blew over and never came up again. To this day, Harry's never said a word about it--to anyone. Ron said he'd almost forgotten about the bars until we found them just now." The wizard fell silent when he finished his tale, and the silence wasn't broken immediately.

At length, a voice was heard. "So, that was why. Thank you, Arthur. I'd wondered."

Everyone turned to face Sirius Black. Arthur swallowed tightly, a little unnerved by the deadly calm look on the other man's face. "Wondered what, Sirius?" he asked hesitantly.

"Why Harry was so quick to accept my invitation to live with me," Sirius said tonelessly. "I'd wondered at the time, but I was so pleased, I didn't question it.

"I felt I needed to make the offer," he continued, "since James and Lily had appointed me as his guardian. I honestly expected him to refuse. I imagined he would rather stay in familiar surroundings, and the best I could hope for was the occasional visit. I was a virtual stranger to him, after all, and we didn't exactly meet under the best of circumstances."

"Harry still thought Sirius had betrayed his family," Remus supplied, when Arabella and Arthur looked a little confused. "Don't anger the lad if you can avoid it. He's got a rather impressive temper when properly inspired."

"And a wicked right hook," Sirius murmured, absently touching the side of his head. Abruptly he shook off his shock. Remus saw this, and put a restraining hand on his arm, but Black managed to keep a firm grip on himself. He looked from Arthur to Albus to Arabella with a dangerous glitter in his eyes. "Harry has admitted that he and his muggle family aren't exactly close, but from what you're saying..." he trailed off, then rounded on Dumbledore, eyes blazing. "Am I to understand that my godson grew up in an abusive household, and no one noticed? "

"So it would seem," Dumbledore said wearily. "Although I believe Harry received a warning from the Improper Use of Magic Office that summer. It's possible that his uncle overreacted to an isolated incident."

"No, that doesn't sound right," Sirius said, frowning as he tried to remember. "I saw Harry and his uncle summer before third year." He closed his eyes, thinking harder, then made an exasperated noise. "I was in my dog form at the time...it's difficult to recall."

Snape abruptly rose from his chair, and headed for the headmaster's fireplace. "Just a moment," he said, stepping into the flames with a speculative look on his face. Two minutes later, he returned with a small vial, which contained maybe a tablespoon of orange liquid. "Here," he said curtly, handing it to Black. "It's the memory potion Voldemort wants. Let's see what his chances are of successfully dosing Pettigrew, shall we?" When the Animagus hesitated, he grew irritated. "It's perfectly safe, Black. I'm not daft enough to poison you in a room full of witnesses!"

Sirius glowered at him for a second, but complied when Dumbledore gave him a slight nod. "Cheers," he told Snape sarcastically, before draining the vial and grimacing at the taste. After a few seconds he could feel it taking effect. Belatedly he wished he'd asked what to expect.

"He will feel some disorientation at first," the potion master said calmly, meeting Remus' questioning gaze when Sirius closed his eyes and swayed slightly in his chair. "The potion stimulates the memory centers of the brain, making even vague remembrances more accessible. The initial rush of thought can be rather overwhelming--probably doubly so for Black seeing how it's unfamiliar territory." He moved to stand in front of Sirius before anyone could respond. "Can you hear me, Black?" he asked. "Come on, man. Concentrate."

Sirius, for his part, watched with something like awe as the images of his life began to rise to the surface. Strangely, there were not very many recent memories. Instead he found himself remembering his

early adulthood, his Hogwarts days, his childhood, and even a few vague impressions from his infancy.

Can you hear me, Black? Come on, man. Concentrate."

With effort, Sirius tried to focus on the voice speaking to him. It was a strange sensation, like swimming up from the bottom of a very deep pool. "I...I hear you," he mumbled.

"Excellent. Now, Black, I need you to concentrate on the first time you saw Potter."

"...James? We met on the Hogwarts Express."

"No, James' son. Harry Potter."

"Oh, yes. Harry." Deep in the memory, Sirius smiled hugely and lifted his hands as if he was supporting an infant's head and bottom. "Cute little thing. Just born today. Smart, too. Already knows his Uncle Paddy."

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and resisted the urge to swear, while his companions smiled at the sappy look on Sirius' face. He couldn't even accuse Black of being a moron on purpose. He'd forgotten how bloody precise the questions had to be when memory or truth potions were used. The intimidation methods he favored when interrogating students were far fresher in his mind. Oh, well. If he had to make a dunderheaded mistake, at least he was doing so in safe surroundings. Voldemort wouldn't be so tolerant.

Re-focusing on Black, he tried again. "You're still too far back. Think of the first time you saw Harry Potter after you'd escaped from Azkaban. It was in Surrey. You were in your dog form. You had found your way to his neighborhood."

Sirius frowned. "Yes. I wanted to check on him before going after Pettigrew. I knew approximately where Petunia used to live." As he was drawn deeper into the memory, Sirius' observations became choppy, and the canine influence became clearer. "It was dark. I knew I had to be close. I had started to pick up scents: cats, Arabella,

and Harry! His scent had changed a little, but I recognized it right away." Sirius sounded slightly surprised when he said this.

"What happened when you found the house?"

"I hid in the shadows. Didn't want to be seen. Heard voices. A man's. Loud. Yelling. 'Come back in here! Come back and put her right!' A boy's. Harry's! Softer. Didn't catch it all. Something like 'She deserved it. Keep away.' The door opened. I could hear and see and smell them both. Anger. Fear. Stress. Blood."

"Blood?" Snape asked sharply, while the others steeled themselves for the worst.

"Yes. The man," Sirius said, much to everyone's surprise. "His leg was bleeding, trousers torn. Heard another dog and other voices inside. Frightened. Confused. Something had obviously happened. I think the dog panicked, and bit the man."

"What of Potter? Was he injured?"

"No. Alert. Furious. On guard, but not hurt. Had his wand pointed at his uncle, keeping him back. Said, 'I'm going, I've had enough,' and left, his wand in one hand, Hedwig's cage under his arm, and dragging his trunk behind him."

"That must have been when Harry blew up his aunt," Arthur supplied. "I never did get the full story behind that one."

Snape nodded, then turned back to Black. "What did you do next?"

"Followed Harry. He went further than I thought he could, all loaded down like that. Must have been the adrenaline. He finally stopped. Seemed more afraid than angry by then. I waited to see what he would do. I wondered if it would be wise to approach him, but he sensed me first. Lifted his wand to do Lumos and accidentally summoned the Knight Bus."

"Yes, that was when Harry ended up at the Leaky Cauldron for the last two weeks of summer," Arabella realized.

"That should be enough, Severus," Dumbledore said. "Is there an antidote?"

Nodding, the potions master retrieved another vial from his robe pocket, and wordlessly placed it into Sirius' hand.

"That doesn't sound like the Harry I know," Mr. Weasley ventured, as they waited for the antidote to take effect. "He's generally very pleasant and even-tempered. I don't think I've ever heard him raise his voice in anger."

"I have," Remus commented, "but you're right. It's not normal behavior. In fact, it's indicative of Harry being provoked to the extreme."

Albus steepled his fingers, and frowned thoughtfully. "Harry has spent a fair amount of time at your houses?" he asked, addressing Arthur and Arabella. At their affirmative nods he continued, "Have you ever observed any unusual wounds or behaviors?"

The witch and wizard he was addressing exchanged a shocked look, then slowly shook their heads. "No, quite the opposite," Arabella said softly. "He showed up occasionally with a stray scrape or bruise, but most of the time he was remarkably injury and illness free. Oh, wait," she said snapping her fingers, "He did have a broken arm once, when he was about three or four. Petunia said it was an accident. I remember, because I watched Dudley while she took Harry to have the cast removed," she elaborated, unconsciously wrinkling her nose in distaste.

"Ah, yes. Charming individual, that one," Arthur said, uncharacteristic sarcasm coloring his voice. "I made his acquaintance last summer," he said in response to Sirius' raised eyebrow. "The twins planted one of their joke candies for him to find. He ate it and things got completely out of hand. It was just a simple engorgement charm. I had him sorted out in no time once I was finally allowed near the boy. They were completely unreasonable, the lot of them. Harry should be awarded an Order of Merlin First Class for managing as well as he has. They weren't even going to say goodbye to him!"

Arabella nodded noncommentally, then frowned as she concentrated. "I knew things weren't perfect for Harry," she said slowly. "Vernon and Petunia were always very partial to their own child. I noticed it the first time I observed them, but Harry had only just arrived. I'd hoped they just needed a little time to adjust."

"I called the ministry a few weeks later, and requested they send someone to check on Harry. I hadn't been as successful as I'd hoped in befriending Petunia. She seemed content to simply use me as a child-minding service from time to time. I tried the usual overtures: speaking to her when we met in public, invitations to tea..." Mrs. Figg shrugged, then continued.

"The ministry sent a junior staffer to check on Harry. He checked in with me when he entered the neighborhood, and stopped by after his visit. He seemed very impressed by the Dursleys' protectiveness. Evidently, they hid Harry, and chased him out of the house once he identified himself as a wizard."

Dumbledore frowned. "I may have that report," he interrupted, searching briefly in his desk, and pulling out a large folder stuffed with parchment. "Here," he announced after leafing briefly through the documents. "He talks about getting the assignment, checking in with Mrs. Figg, and heading over to Privet Drive," Albus summarized as he scanned the paper. When he got to the paragraph detailing the visit, he began to read aloud:

Harry Potter has been placed in a very neat, well-kept home. His aunt, Mrs. Petunia Dursley, seems to be a very loving mother. Her own son is a very robust boy, who seems to be thriving under her care.

I interacted only briefly with young Mr. Potter while his aunt prepared tea. He was quieter and shyer than the Dursley boy, but like his cousin, he was clean, and dressed in clothing appropriate for the weather. I could see no injuries or signs of excessive stress, and though he didn't speak, he smiled very sweetly when I addressed him. I did notice that he didn't interact a lot with his cousin, but this observation is based on a very short visit.

The visit went surprisingly well until I identified myself as a ministry wizard. She had not been warned that I was making this visit, of course. Furthermore, I had not stated my business outright, wanting the chance to observe the household in its normal state. The effect my identity had on his aunt was awe-inspiring. She snatched up Mr. Potter and stowed him in a cupboard under the stairs, snapped at her own son to keep back, then rounded on me.

I don't believe I've ever seen such fierce determination. She looked at me with something akin to hatred, ordered me out of her house, and demanded I stay away from her family. I tried to explain that this was just a routine check to insure Mr. Potter's welfare, but that just made her angrier. She referenced "my kind." I suppose she meant magical folk. I believe her words were, "It's you and the rest of your kind's fault that he is here! He shouldn't be here! He should be with his own kind!" By this I assume she was referring to Mr. Potter, and the unfortunate betrayal of his parents. She seemed most distressed about the failed plan to protect the Potters from You-Know-Who.

I tried to reassure her that she was very well protected, and I was not a dark wizard, while she escorted me to the door, but she wasn't having any of it. She informed me that she didn't want anything from me, and demanded that "my kind" stay away. She said, "Lily was daft enough to trust you, and look what happened to her! I'll not have you popping 'round and putting my family at risk!"

We had reached the door by then. She demanded I leave and never return. Naturally I left, not wanting to agitate her further. Mr. Potter seems to be in no immediate danger, and based on my interactions with his aunt, I feel I must recommend that interaction between the Ministry of Magic and the Dursley family be kept to a minimum. Any questions concerning this matter must be directed to Mrs. Arabella Figg. Security mandates that I be placed under a memory charm to erase Mr. Potter's location.

"Yes. That was what he told me." Arabella held her forehead when Albus finished reading. "They left him with me when the family went on outings--it seemed to agree with what I'd been told. I didn't approve, but I thought they were just overprotective of Harry. I still remember the glare Vernon gave me when I suggested they take

Harry along once. I don't think he meant for me to hear, but he muttered something like, 'And risk getting blown up?' I thought they were still wary of being attacked, but couldn't reassure him, since I was supposed to be a muggle. They seemed almost phobic of magic. Petunia told me once how she had disposed of a book of fairy tales. I was afraid if I admitted I was a witch..." Arabella trailed off with a helpless shrug, then held her forehead as the truth came crashing down on her. "They've resented him! They've resented him all this time! I can't believe I was so blind!"

"A common Gryffindor failing," Snape said, but his voice lacked its usual acerbity. "Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs aren't as adept at picking up subtle clues, and reading between the lines as Ravenclaws and Slytherins are. They want to believe everyone has the best intentions at heart."

"What about you, Arthur?" the headmaster queried, after they had pondered Snape's words in silence for a bit. "Did you notice anything unusual when Harry stayed with you?"

"Well, Molly's always going on about how thin he is," the red head responded thoughtfully. "She might be a better one to ask, since she's spent more time around him. I've noticed he's quiet, patient, helpful, well mannered...if anything, he's too good. I was a little concerned when Ron started asking to invite him to stay. I thought he might be a handful--used to special treatment and lots of attention, but that just isn't the case. He seems to like to blend into the background. Most of the time you hardly know he's there. The only time he ever caused us concern was when he and Ron panicked, and took my old Anglia when they couldn't get through the barrier at Platform 9 ¾, and missed the Hogwarts Express."

"Very well. I think between Harry's status on the locator clock, his possession of the Order portkey, and what you all have just reported, it is safe to assume that his is in no current danger."

"Are you suggesting we leave Harry with the Dursleys?" Arabella demanded in shock.

"I am suggesting nothing of the sort," Albus responded testily. "I have a colleague from the International Confederation of Wizards who resides near Perth. I am sure he will be happy to help us track down Harry's wayward family, and check on him for us. However, it's..." Dumbledore counted briefly on his fingers, "...currently 2:00 a.m. in Perth at the moment. If we have reason to believe that Harry is in immediate physical danger, I will awaken him now. If not, I would rather place the call at a more civilized time. As a matter of fact, I just received a report from Harry. He mentioned his relatives had relocated." He located Harry's original letter, then picked up the report he'd just been sent, and handed them to Sirius.

The ex-convict grinned happily as he began reading, but was soon frowning worriedly. Remus, Arthur, Arabella and Severus moved where they could see as well, and read along.

"If I may, headmaster," Snape spoke up when they'd finished, "we might be able to use this situation to our advantage."

Five pairs of eyes turned to him. "How is that, Severus?" Dumbledore inquired.

"Potter's circumstances may not be ideal, but we are agreed that he should be all right for now. Correct?" When his companions nodded, Snape went on. "As I was coming to tell you before being swept up in this gaggle of Gryffindors, the memory potion is finished. I shall be delivering it a little later. If the reaction it got from Black is any indication, Voldemort should be able to extract whatever information he desires from Wormtail.

Snape turned to face Arthur Weasley. "You say that your sons went to Surrey to collect Potter summer of '92?"

"Yes."

"And at that time, Wormtail was still in your household under the guise of a pet rat?"

"Scabbers. Yes. He was Percy's pet, then Ron's."

"Voldemort is planning an attack against Potter. Even he realizes it," Snape sneered, jerking a thumb toward the parchment in Black's hands. He addressed Arthur again. "I realize you can't answer for certain, but is it reasonable to assume that your sons discussed their route in front of Wormtail?"

"Oh, most certainly. Ron almost always had Scabbers with him."

"So you think Wormtail knows Harry's address?" Remus said, stunned, "and Voldemort is going to use the potion to get it?"

"It's a distinct possibility. However, if the house is vacant, we could arrange a little sting operation," Snape suggested. "Between Potter and myself, Albus should know immediately if my suspicions are correct. Afterwards, we can work on determining when the attack will take place. We can charm the house, so no one will buy it, at least in the short term. The risk of casualties will be dramatically decreased if the Death Eaters are sent to attack an empty house."

"Yes, and if we're very lucky, a certain rat will be with them," Remus added, elbowing his rather put-out looking friend. "Buck up, Sirius. The plan has merit, and we may get a shot at Wormtail. If Harry's survived this long, he can last another few hours."

"All right then," Albus said, the very picture of grim determination, "Let's get to work."

Chapter 13 - Meanwhile, Back At Diagon Alley...

Saturday, July 15, 1995

Blissfully ignorant of the commotion he was about to cause, Harry Potter, in his guise of Jim Patterson, mild-mannered student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, read over what he had just written to his headmaster.

Mindful of Professor Dumbledore's request, Harry had carefully transcribed all the information he had written in his little notebook, and tried to honestly express his thoughts and impressions about what was happening with his scar.

It hadn't been easy. His first instinct, as always, was to jealously guard anything that could be perceived as weakness, and swallow his own problems, and fears. As a young child he'd never been able, or even allowed to open up to the Dursleys. They silenced him when he tried to ask questions, accused him of lying when he swore he didn't know why weird things happened, insisted he was "up to something" if he smiled or laughed, and made him the target of their scornful ridicule if he came to them seeking assistance, reassurance, or advice. As a result, Harry had become remarkably self-sufficient at a very young age. Even now he turned to the adults in his life only when absolutely necessary, preferring to either confide in his friends, or just handle things himself.

Dumbledore seemed genuinely worried, though, and as much as Harry might wish otherwise, the headmaster's concerns were justified. If the painful twinges he felt when Voldemort fired weak, warning curses were anything to go by, he was going to be in real trouble when the dark wizard finally brought his full power to bear. The repeating threats of an attack were another problem. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Voldemort was targeting him.

Harry twirled his quill absently between his thumb and index finger. He wasn't keen on announcing to Dumbledore that the Dursleys had moved away, but what choice did he have? The chances of the property being discovered empty were entirely too good. Voldemort obviously wanted him, erm, dealt with. In light of this new threat,

Dumbledore might decide that the enchantments on the house needed to be strengthened, or added to. Even if he didn't, Mrs. Figg might drop by with a job or an errand for him. The Weasleys might decide to surprise him once the warding of their home was completed. Not to mention Hermione would certainly get suspicious if she tried to phone and reached a disconnected number.

Besides, Professor Snape had been at some of the Death Eater meetings he'd witnessed, and the Potions Master would probably not be inclined to hide what was going on. He might be a greasy git, and the scourge of Gryffindors in general, but the man had never failed to defend him when he had been in actual danger. Harry would accomplish nothing by withholding information, except maybe to cast doubt on himself and his connection's strength and reliability...and he didn't want that. The boy could still remember his helpless frustration the year before when Snape doubted his story about Barty Crouch Sr., and wouldn't allow him to see the headmaster.

Harry sighed, and raked his other hand through his hair, trying to decide what to write. He hadn't even bothered to find out where the Dursleys had gone. It hadn't seemed to matter since he had no intention of ever going back to them. Tom, bless him, hadn't pressed the issue, but Harry knew his behavior was baffling the old man. If this was a misunderstanding of some kind, as the innkeeper had hinted, a phone call would clear it up in minutes. Harry just hadn't taken the time. He didn't imagine they'd gone far, anyway--his aunt and uncle had never seemed to be adventurous types. They were probably still in Surrey...although they might have ventured as far away as London. Eugh, practically next door! What a horrible thought!

In the end he'd scribbled a short, vague, reference to the property at 4 Privet Drive being vacant. It seemed kinder than letting someone stumble across the house unprepared. He looked at the little paragraph, feeling his conscience prod him. He didn't lie, exactly, but his wording implied that he was with his relatives, where ever they were. It wasn't, perhaps, the best decision, but he didn't imagine the truth would go over well. Harry rolled his eyes as he imagined that letter:

Dear Professor Dumbledore:

I'm working for my keep at the Leaky Cauldron, seeing as my family abandoned me and I can't risk getting shipped off to an orphanage or endangering my friends. On the upside, I finally got some clothes that fit. Hope you are well...

Shrugging, Harry added If Voldemort is planning to attack me there I'm afraid he'll be disappointed. There. That should be good enough. Now Dumbledore would know that the dark lord was wasting his time planning attacks on empty houses! Anyway, the letter proved he was all right, and should set the headmaster's mind at rest.

A glance at his little bedside clock made Harry wince. He hadn't intended to spend so much time on this letter, but there had been a lot of information to pass along. He'd also dithered quite a bit over what to say and how to say it once he finished copying from his notebook and started talking about his scar. Oh, well. It should do. At any rate, he needed to finish up if he was going to at least start another letter before he was expected downstairs.

Getting a proper grip on his quill again, Harry signed the last page, then firmly tapped the little phoenix on each of the four pieces of parchment. As he watched, his words sank into the paper and disappeared. It was cool, but Harry felt a shiver of déjà vu when he saw the effect. It was a little too close to the way Tom Riddle's diary worked for his peace of mind.

The similarities ended there, though. Tom's diary had retained its magic. Dumbledore's sheets of parchment did not. Harry had been told what to expect, but he hadn't realized he would be able to observe the magic leaving. After the message was sent, the paper sparkled slightly, and the totems across the top disappeared, leaving four perfectly normal sheets of parchment behind.

Gathering the parchment into a stack, Harry chewed on his lower lip, and tapped the paper with his quill. Who should he write to first? What was safe to say? The letters he still needed to answer were stacked to his right, so Harry picked them up and glanced over them.

It looked like the letters he would be writing would be remarkably similar. He had slightly different questions to answer and remarks to address, but there were recurring themes, too: his relatives, his job, his health and well being...

Harry wrinkled his nose at the blank parchment before him and made an aggravated sound. It was difficult to know where to start. A lot had happened in the week since he'd sent out his original notes. Eventually he began jotting down answers to the questions he had been asked and making notes about things that had happened, figuring he could practice first, then write the proper letters later.

Dear Everyone, he began, then lined the letters up along the back of the desk so he could refer to them as he worked.

Ron and Sirius both asked outright how his relatives were treating him. Well, that was easy enough.

The Dursleys are being even bigger prats than usual.

Hmm. That sounded a little desperate. Better fix that.

Don't worry, I don't need rescuing or real food or anything, but I am grateful for my job. It's been a real lifesaver.

So now, how to describe the job... Harry tapped the feather end of his quill against his cheek as he considered this.

His store-hopping schedule was something of an experiment, devised by Tom and the other merchants. Since underage students was not commonly employed in the magical community, there were very few established precedents to go by. Tom, mindful of Harry's "over achieving" tendencies, had been particularly careful to set limits on the boy's schedule. In addition to his duties at the Leaky Cauldron, Harry had an optional "short shift" of not more than two hours between breakfast and lunch, and a longer shift of not more than four hours in the afternoon between lunch and dinner.

Initially, Harry had worried about his inability to do magic away from school, but his fears had been proven groundless. The merchants of

Diagon Alley had put him to work doing things that were generally done by hand anyway. This freed up the shopkeepers and their clerks, so they could attend to other matters, and they seemed to like it very much. In fact, Harry noted with amusement, his compensation was generally increased somewhat when he tackled jobs that the current store's staff especially hated.

Work is going fine. I'm doing a lot of small things, like general cleaning and maintenance, unpacking and logging new merchandise, taking inventory, and re-stocking shelves. The variety keeps things interesting, and I've really learned a lot.

Now there was an understatement. The last few days had been a real eye-opener for the Boy Who Lived. Because he had been raised in the muggle world, Harry had very little practical experience with every day magic in the magical community. From what he'd observed at the Leaky Cauldron and at the Burrow, he'd figured that tidying up was done exclusively with charms. He'd been certain that the clean-by-hand methods he had learned at the Dursleys would be considered useless in the magical world, except perhaps for serving detentions at Hogwarts.

And he'd been wrong.

There were applications magic was ideal for, of course. Spot removal, for instance. Repairing breaks. Mending tears. Most witches and wizards, even the weaker, less talented ones could manage these small chores because all the caster's magic was concentrated on one small thing.

Directing a cleaning charm--or any charm, actually--on a larger area was another matter. It was trickier...not as straightforward. Even talented spell casters had trouble sometimes. Factors like natural aptitude, skill, training, and raw magical strength became more of an issue. Harry knew the theory from Professor Flitwick's class, although he hadn't attempted any yet. Those types of charms were considered advanced topics for fifth year and above.

The moral of the story was, magic was more convenient, but every now and then a good muggle scrubbing was required to deep clean

and get the missed corners. Harry hadn't seen a lot of "by-hand" scrubbing because even though they agreed it was necessary, and had superior products like Mrs. Skowers Magical Mess Remover, most witches and wizards absolutely detested cleaning by hand. Generally, they either disliked the inconvenience and mess, or had "pureblood" issues. Tom had speculated that this attitude might even have been how the custom of keeping house elves had originated, though no one knew for sure.

My boss is very nice, and seems pleased with my work. Harry continued. He spoke well of me to some of the other shopkeepers, and some of them have had me do little jobs for them as well.

Well, he might have downplayed that a little, but again, it was true enough. Earlier in the week, Harry had done tasks for Flourish & Blotts, the Apothecary, the Magical Menagerie, Florean Fortescue's, Gambol & Japes, and Eeylope's Owl Emporium. Today, he had spent his short shift at Quality Quidditch Supplies, and the afternoon at Madam Malkin's Robes For All Occasions.

The boy put down his quill, stretched his fingers, and let his mind wander back. Today had actually been quite eventful, but he couldn't really discuss it without giving himself away. God, but it was frustrating! Maybe if he couldn't go the Burrow, a day visit could be arranged. There were some things he was simply bursting to tell Ron and Hermione! Harry smiled mischievously. He would offer to meet them at the Leaky Cauldron.

It had started that morning with the breakfast crowd. Harry had discovered that even well-cast spells weren't perfect, and charmed objects couldn't necessarily "see" or "think." He'd just finished clearing some tables, and had put a plate with a spoonful of half-dried jam on its edge into the sink. Usually this wasn't a problem. Tom's charmed brush was usually very thorough, but today...

Today the washing brush had missed a spot. Harry still couldn't fathom how it had happened. It had been a fairly healthy dollop.

That was bad enough, but to complicate things, the drying towel hadn't missed. It wiped the glob of jam off the plate as it dried it, then

proceeded to smear the sticky mess on the next three dishes in line before they noticed what had happened.

Harry chuckled a little. Tom had exploded into rather colorful language before remembering his presence and becoming highly embarrassed.

Things settled down after that. His stint at the Quidditch store had been largely unremarkable. Just handling a small order that the store owner had received. Lunch at the Leaky Cauldron had been pretty tame too, until Hedwig and Fawkes showed up, that is.

The real action, however, had occurred when he headed down the Alley for the second time.

Harry had been dead nervous as he approached the robe shop. Remembering his outing with Dr. Granger, he'd dearly hoped he wouldn't be required to help customers make their selections. It wasn't that he wanted to hide in the back all the time. Harry interacted a bit with the shoppers, usually when he was on the main sales floor stocking shelves, and liked it very much. He didn't mind answering questions, directing them to the appropriate department, or fetching items, but he really couldn't picture himself following someone around and doing the whole "oh that looks wonderful on you" or "do you need another size" routine.

He needn't have troubled himself. Madam Malkin had greeted him pleasantly, verified that he wanted to earn credit toward new school and dress robes, then led him to the back. She had just received a large shipment of material, trims, supplies, and accessories, and wanted him to sort it out.

As they walked, Harry took the opportunity to look around. He'd never bothered to go beyond the Hogwarts uniform area on previous visits, so the rest of the store was new to him.

Besides school and dress robes, there were several glittering accessory displays, and a small shoe department. Some of the robes were plainer than others, but none could be called "casual." When he asked about it, Madam Malkin told him she had a sort of 'gentleman's

agreement' with Gladrags Wizardwear. She handled the fancy things, they carried everyday items. It was a practical, workable arrangement for merchants and customers alike.

The back room had managed to be orderly and chaotic at the same time. Robes in various stages of completion were draped over dressmaker's forms, bolts of material stood in shallow shelves along three walls, and the fourth held threads, trims, and other sewing needs. Three witches in gray work robes, whom Madam Malkin introduced as Colleen, Dara, and Maggie, were busily measuring, cutting, and sewing. By the looks of things, someone was planning a wedding with a very large bridal party.

After the introductions had been made, Madam Malkin took Harry over to the large stack of shipment boxes, gave him some quick instructions, and left him to it. The wizard had grinned when he pulled open the first box, and saw the bolts of familiar black cloth inside. Madam Malkin was obviously stocking up for the back to school rush.

The Malkin filing system was mercifully straightforward--the bolts of cloth were sorted by type and color--and Harry had little difficulty with it. He hadn't known much about different materials though, so Maggie, Colleen and Dara took it upon themselves to give him a crash course while he worked. The Gryffindor had been able to identify some basic types, like silk, velvet, and linen, but by the time he finished unloading and storing the shipment, Harry knew more than he ever wanted to about shantung, taffeta, tulle, chiffon, seersucker, chintz, and damask. After he'd finished storing the trims, threads, fasteners, and other sewing paraphernalia his head was literally spinning with new terminology. Who would have thought that clothing could be so complicated!

Harry picked up his quill again. I've met some very nice people, and run into some others I haven't seen in a while...

Life had gotten exciting when Harry finished in the back, and then wandered out with one of the boxes of accessories. Madam Malkin had been waiting on a family. She had a blond boy up on a footstool, and was pinning the set of shimmery pearl-gray robes he was wearing to the correct length. Harry hung back, intending to approach

her for instructions when she was finished. He was just thinking that there was something disturbingly familiar about the family, when the blond boy turned, and he had felt his blood turn to ice.

Malfoy!

Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, Harry had clutched the box close, and backed away. Thankfully the Malfoys didn't notice him. When his fitting was done, Draco hopped lightly off the stool, and left to go have a look in Quality Quidditch Supplies while his mother selected some robes for herself.

Harry had mentally crossed his fingers, hoping fervently Draco's father, Lucius Malfoy, would leave too. Narcissa Malfoy didn't know him that well, and probably wouldn't recognize him, but Lucius had seen him up close on the night of the Third Task!

Unfortunately, he hadn't gotten his wish. Lucius Malfoy was evidently expected to stay. Madam Malkin dragged her comfortable "waiting chair" over for him to sit in, then led Narcissa over to the fancier women's robes. On the way she noticed Harry.

"Oh, Sparky! Please forgive me for overlooking you. I'm afraid you'll have to make a little noise around here. Right here, Mrs. Malfoy. I'll be with you in one quick second. Now dear, the accessories are sorted by brand, and stored on these racks..."

Harry had listened nervously as the squat, mauve-robed witch rattled on about hair ornaments shoe decorations, and costume jewelry, all the while horribly aware of Lucius Malfoy's presence. At that moment, Harry had wanted to run for it more than anything he'd ever wanted before, but he managed to resist the urge. The comforting weight of the phoenix pendant against his chest helped calm him as well. As long as his hands were free, he had an escape.

Working rapidly, he had begun to sort out the accessories. He kept a wary eye on Mr. Malfoy, but the man didn't deign to acknowledge Madam Malkin's "hired help." Indeed, the other wizard was the very picture of bored, disgruntled masculinity. If the situation hadn't been

so serious it would have been funny. Harry began to wonder if Mr. Malfoy had lost a bet with his wife--or his son.

Narcissa had been a challenging customer, insisting that Madam Malkin remain with her at all times, and dropping the robes she rejected in a pile on the floor. Harry caught the robe maker throwing harassed looks at the doors to the back room, but she didn't call for reinforcements. Perhaps they were running a bit behind schedule with the wedding things.

When Narcissa stepped on the pile of robes, after discarding her eighth or tenth set, Madam Malkin finally remembered Harry. Catching his eye, she glanced at the robes on the floor, then nodded toward a bar secured to the wall beside the mirror. Harry nodded his understanding when she looked him in the eye again, trying to ignore his stomach's uncomfortable lurch.

As he neared the fitting area, he caught Lucius Malfoy's attention. Resisting the instinct to squirm under the man's calculating gaze, Harry quickly did as Madam Malkin bade, wanting to escape the man's scrutiny as soon as possible. He'd been nervous as hell, mouth dry, heart hammering, palms sweating...

At first Malfoy surveyed Harry with bored disinterest. He seemed to dismiss the boy out of hand, which was perfectly fine as far as Harry was concerned. He had just hung the last robe, and about to make good his escape, when Lucius looked up sharply, as though realizing something. "Boy," he had ordered, "Come here."

Harry had reluctantly approached the man, every nerve in his body buzzing with alarm. When Malfoy had reached out and grasped his wrist he'd experienced a thick, reeling moment, certain that he was caught. Portkey! Harry had thought desperately, starting to reach for it, then his eyes had fallen on his trapped wrist. If he touched the pendant, he'd drag Mr. Malfoy to Hogwarts with him. Was this a good plan? Was anyone at Hogwarts? Perhaps he should try to wrench free first...what?

Malfoy had pressed some coins into his hand. Harry blinked, then looked at him blankly, irritating the other wizard. "I told you to go fetch

me a copy of the Daily Prophet, you dim-witted dolt!" Malfoy snapped. "Now move!" he commanded, making dismissive flipping motions with his hand.

"Right away, sir," Harry said dazedly, after glancing at Madam Malkin, and receiving her grateful nod of permission. At the time he'd been too relieved to be annoyed by Malfoy's customary I-am-perfect-and-you-are-scum attitude, and really, the situation was just too funny. He'd had to battle down a shout of rather hysterical laughter when he'd returned with Lucius' paper and change--especially when Lucius had rather pompously gifted him with the few Knuts that had been left over. Talk about surreal! His position of "general laborer" had put him beneath Malfoy's notice.

At length, Narcissa had finally settled on a set of midnight blue robes charmed to sparkle like a twilight sky. After they left, Madam Malkin muttered something uncomplimentary that made Harry laugh out loud. The disparaging comment didn't suit the little dressmaker at all. "You weren't supposed to hear that," Malkin said sheepishly, turning the same color as her robes.

Harry immediately stopped laughing and covered his mouth contritely with one hand. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Madam Malkin gave him a curious look. "Whatever for? I should be apologizing to you for allowing him speak to you so rudely. I'm afraid I was rather shocked by his presumption. Thank you for being good enough to get his paper, though."

"It was nothing, Madam Malkin."

I'm working on a little project I hope Ron and Hermione will be able to help me with later in the summer. Some details are still being worked out at the moment, so I'll have to write more after everything is finalized.

Yeah, Fawkes had nearly shocked him out of his wits, and the Malfoy encounter had almost been enough to send him to St. Mungo's, but as far as Harry was concerned, the most unbelievable event of the whole ruddy day had occurred just as he was leaving the robe shop.

Hedwig had met him in the Alley with several sheets of parchment as he'd said his goodbyes to Madam Malkin and her staff. The Gryffindor's eyes had widened, and he had thanked the owl profusely while giving himself a mental slap when he realized what she had.

Geoffrey Reed, the manager of Flourish & Blotts had given him an assignment of sorts. He'd finished the night before, and planned to drop it off at the bookstore on his way back from Madam Malkin's, but had gotten so wrapped up in the box from Mrs. Figg's house, he'd forgotten to grab it on his way out.

"Hello, Mr. Patterson," Geoffrey Reed had greeted him when he'd entered the bookstore a few minutes later. "What can I help you with?"

"I've finished my revisions, sir...you said you wanted to see them?" Harry said, beginning to feel a little unsure of himself.

Mr. Reed seemed pleased. "Finished already, eh? Well, let's go to my office, and see what you have, shall we?" he invited, ushering Harry in and offering him a seat.

Perched uncertainly on the edge of his chair, Harry passed the parchment to Geoffrey, and watched uneasily as the manager began to peruse his work. On his first day at Flourish and Blotts, he had run across a box of pamphlets while cleaning out the back room. They were informational reading for muggleborns--an attempt to ease their way into the magical world.

When Harry had asked Mr. Reed why the pamphlets weren't being used, the man had sighed, obviously frustrated, and admitted that they were a failed experiment. The brochures had been written, and edited by highly acclaimed and accredited witches and wizards, but in spite of this, Muggleborn first-years consistently found them more confusing than helpful.

That hadn't made sense to Harry until he had read one. When he finished, he understood completely.

It wasn't that the information in the brochures was deliberately wrong or misleading, it was just...incomplete. It was a case of a witch or wizard trying to explain things that they considered perfectly normal to muggleborns, who had never experienced such things before.

Harry recognized this primarily because he'd made the same kind of mistake summer before second year. In his first floundering attempts to explain "perfectly normal" muggle things to Mr. Weasley, he'd glossed over tiny intermediate steps and left out details that were common knowledge in the muggle world thinking Arthur was aware of them as well. Things went much better when Harry realized his mistake, and became more methodical and detailed with his explanations.

The authors of the pamphlet evidently hadn't cottoned on to this subtle point. After having been part of wizard society for the past few years, Harry had the knowledge to fill in the unspoken steps, and was able to read and understand the document. If he'd been given this same paper going into first year, however, he wouldn't have been able to make sense of it. Hermione might have been able to, since she'd done all that preparatory reading, but it was by no means a sure bet.

When Harry pointed out his observation to Mr. Reed, the man had given him a thoughtful look, then floored him completely by suggesting he have a go at updating it. "You seem to have a feel for what muggleborns go through," Geoffrey had pointed out, interrupting Harry's incoherent sputtering. "Are you one yourself? Or one of your parents, perhaps?"

Harry had nodded, not specifying which question he was answering. "I didn't know I was a wizard until I got my Hogwarts letter," Harry said with a shrug and a grin, hoping Mr. Reed would draw the conclusion that he himself was muggleborn. The diversion worked, and that had basically been the end of that conversation.

Nervously shifting in his seat, Harry had watched Mr. Reed, trying to get a sense of what he was thinking. The manager wasn't giving a lot away, though, frowning slightly as he scanned the new brochure--well actually, it was more of a booklet now. Swallowing nervously, Harry

prepared himself for the worst. How could he have been so stupid? Why had he ever thought he could do this? He could almost hear Vernon and Petunia's mocking voices now: So the little freak fancies himself a writer! Oh, that's rich! Who would be daft enough to believe anything you had to say?

"Excellent!"

Harry snapped back to the present, and opened eyes he hadn't realized he'd closed. "Sorry?"

"Outstanding work, Mr. Patterson, I must congratulate you!" Geoffrey was all smiles now. "You've hit the proverbial nail on the head! If I send this to Hogwarts today, maybe the staff can approve it in time to send it out with this years' letters. Mr. Patterson? I say, are you all right?"

Harry nodded, dumbly, still in a state of shock. Strict, picky, Mr. Reed actually liked his ideas! Unreal. It was like getting accolades from Percy Weasley. "Yes sir," he finally managed to say. "Sorry, I was afraid you wouldn't like it."

"Well it's not as formal as the original," Mr. Reed said, speculatively, "but that isn't necessarily bad. I rather like your lighthearted approach. This is supposed to be for eleven-year-olds, after all. I think besides leaving out pertinent information, we forgot to consider this document's intended audience. You've taken care of both splendidly."

"Thank you, sir. Erm, there's one more thing if you don't mind," Harry said hesitantly, wishing it wasn't so blessed hard to talk to adults. His friends were much easier to deal with. He waited for Reed's nod, then shared an idea he'd been kicking around ever since he'd taken on the project.

"I had someone who helped me along the first time I came to Diagon Alley. He answered my questions and did his best to explain things," Harry said, thinking fondly of Hagrid. "The brochure is a good idea, but perhaps we could offer the new muggleborn students and their families the same kind of chance. They could come to Diagon Alley in groups...maybe on Sundays when things are less crowded. It's kind

of short notice to get a prefect to act as the guide and answer questions, but I could do that this year. I'm going to be around, anyway, and if I'm lucky, I might even be able to get my friends to help," Harry realized he was babbling, and stopped, looking uncertainly up at the other wizard.

Geoffrey had stared at the boy in front of him in amazement for a few seconds, then shook his head bemusedly. "Sparky," he said finally, "you're a treasure."

Sighing, Harry pulled his attention back to the present, and summed up his frustration in one heartfelt line. There's so many things I want to tell you, but I really need to wait until I see you in person. He felt sort of guilty then, and was glad the "letter" he was writing was just being used to organize his thoughts. The Weasleys were working very hard to put protective magic on the Burrow, and Dumbledore and his order were doing everything in their power to check Voldemort's progress. They didn't need to listen to his whining.

Harry threw down his quill in disgust, and glanced at his clock. This was going nowhere fast. Perhaps he should take a small break. He wasn't expected in the kitchen just yet, but he would be soon. He should probably go on downstairs--finish his letters later.

Tom looked up, startled, then smiled cheerily when he noticed Harry was in the kitchen. It really was too bad that those silencing charms were necessary on the boy's room and the back stairs. "You're early, tonight," you know, he said, watching as Harry donned an apron.

"I know," he said with a shrug. "I just got to a stopping point and decided to come early instead of starting something else."

Tom nodded. "Well, it's been pretty quiet so far this evening," he said, then stopped when the door that opened into Muggle London opened and closed accompanied by the jingling of bells.

"You were saying?" Harry snickered saucily.

"That's enough out of you, laddie," the old wizard replied with mock seriousness. "Obviously the customers were waiting for you to put in an appearance before they did."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Please. No one comes here just to see me."

"Oh really." Tom imitated Harry's expression and began ticking points off on his fingers. "What about that cute little witch who helps her mum and dad run their stand in the farmer's market?"

"Chandra."

"Mmm-hmm. And the little blonde clerk from Flourish & Blotts?"

"Erin. So?"

"And of course we can't forget Mrs. Talridge."

"Tom!"

"I'm just having you on, lad, but people have started asking for you. That's quite a compliment, especially since you haven't been at it for long." Chuckling fondly, the innkeeper reached out and gave Harry a little shove toward the door. "Now, let's go see who's here."

"Right," Harry said, pushing the kitchen door open, and stepping into the main part of the pub. At first there didn't seem to be anyone there. Harry exchanged a confused look with Tom. Someone had entered. "Hello? Is anyone here?" he called.

At first there was no answer, then at length, a very small, uncertain voice said, "Yes." There was a pause, then another voice, much younger than the first cried, "Mama! Where Mama?" and burst into noisy tears.

Chapter 14 - Ms Wright

Saturday, July 15, 1995

Harry glanced around in confusion, as he tried to pinpoint the source of the crying. If anything, he was used to having to look up slightly when he greeted customers. It took a few seconds for him to realize where the sound was coming from and shift his line of vision down.

There, just inside the door was a girl of about nine or so, with straight, light brown hair and glasses. Beside her was another girl who looked to be no more than two or three. Her hair was shorter and darker than the other girl's, and hung in wispy baby-curls.

At the moment, the older girl was looking bewildered and annoyed at the same time, as she fruitlessly worked the door latch with one hand, and fought to hold onto the baby with the other. The toddler was obviously unimpressed with her current circumstances, and was letting the world know of her displeasure. Wailing half in fear, half in indignation, she called for her mother again, and tried to yank her arm out of the other girl's grip.

Since Harry hadn't dealt with someone that young since he was that young himself, he found himself somewhat at a loss--wanting to give comfort, but not quite sure how. He glanced at Tom for guidance, but the other wizard was already moving toward the pair.

Careful to keep his pace non-threatening, Tom plucked a couple of napkins off a table as he passed by and knelt in front of the girls. Calmly, he offered one of the napkins to the older one who, Harry noticed for the first time, was crying as well. She just wasn't going at it as wholeheartedly as the little one was. Harry shook his head in wonder as he watched the scene in front of him, his respect for the old innkeeper going up another notch.

"There now, what's all this noise? It can't be as bad as all that, now can it?" Tom was saying, talking to the girls in a soothing, reassuring way. The baby calmed somewhat--stopped screaming at least--when the older girl relaxed enough to loosen the death grip she had on her arm. "Now then," Tom said, as the girls wiped their tears away, and

their sobs gradually tapered off to hitches and sniffles, "My name is Tom." Motioning for Harry to approach, he included him in the introduction, "and this is Sparky."

"Hi," Harry said, with a smile, as two pairs of watery eyes, one brown, and one gray-blue, turned to him. "So, what are your names?" he asked after a second, following Tom's lead, and keeping his voice gentle and friendly.

"I'm Kitty, and this is my sister, Becky," the older one supplied, studying the two wizards cautiously.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," Harry said, keeping his smile firmly in place but thinking furiously behind it. He didn't have a perfect ear for accents, but he'd almost be willing to bet that Kitty and Becky hailed from somewhere in the United States. Were they on holiday then? Sightseeing on Charing Cross Road perhaps?

Kitty hesitantly returned his smile, then tensed up again, and yanked at the door with renewed vigor. "Nice to meet you too...but we really need to get out and find Mom!"

"What happened, Kitty? When was the last time you saw your mother?" Tom asked, skillfully drawing her attention back to him.

"She left!" the little girl blurted, shaking her head in dismay and starting to tear up again. "She was right behind us! We were looking for a place to have dinner. I thought your place looked nice, and the door was open, so we came in." She pointed toward the window. "But Mom didn't stop--she kept walking! I shut the door and couldn't open it again...and...and... Mom's gonna be so mad!" she wailed.

"Shush, love," Tom said, with a rueful glance at the offending portal. The door that opened into muggle London stuck sometimes. It had been acting up today so he'd left it ajar earlier. He'd been meaning to have a look at it, or have Harry look at it, but they hadn't gotten around to it.

The door was charmed to close itself once it was set in motion. Regulars at the Leaky Cauldron were aware of the door's

idiosyncrasies, and usually left it open if they found it so. If Kitty tried to close it, though, the charm kicked in and it wedged itself shut. Tom sighed softly and patted Kitty on the back. "It will be all right, you'll see. Stop crying now, you're scaring your sister," he chided gently, noticing the toddler's trembling lip and tear-bright eyes. Looking up at Harry over the girls' heads, he mouthed, "Muggleborn."

Harry's eyes widened. Oh. OH! Of course the mother would pass innocently by! The Leaky Cauldron seemed invisible to most muggles. Even magical folk almost had to know where the Leaky Cauldron was to spot it. Harry had nearly overlooked it himself the first time Hagrid had brought him here, and had long suspected the place was charmed to partially hide itself.

"It will be safer if you stay here, and let us bring your mother to you," Tom said practically. "Now then, what does your Mum look like? Don't fret, she can't have gone too far away," he added when Kitty got a pained look on her face and involuntarily glanced out the window. "I expect she's noticed you're not with her by now."

"Well, she has brown eyes like me," Kitty began, but was interrupted by her sister.

"Mama gots back haiw wike Becky," she said, tugging at her own dark curls, then she pointed to her sister. "Daddy gots bown haiw wike Kitty."

Harry paused a moment, working through what she said. Oh, right. Mama has black hair like Becky, Daddy has brown hair like Kitty. Gotcha. "So is your father out there as well?" he asked.

"No," Kitty said, pouting a little. "He'll be here in a few days."

"All right then," Tom said briskly. He glanced down at the sisters, who had both unconsciously moved closer to him, then up at Harry. "Would you go, Sparky? She should be easy enough to spot. Hurry now, the poor dear's probably frantic with worry."

Harry privately wondered how on earth Tom expected him to find a muggle woman he'd never laid eyes on before with only the vague

description of "black hair and brown eyes" to go by, but he nodded gamely, and shouldered the door open.

The light of late afternoon was casting long shadows, as Harry stepped onto the street. It would be dusk soon. Muggle shopkeepers were turning on their lighted storefronts, or else getting ready to close for the evening.

All in all there wasn't a lot of foot traffic, Harry noted with relief. Maybe he'd be able to spot "Mum" at that. Taking off in the direction Kitty had indicated, Harry walked down the street, pausing to look in shop windows, and examine faces as he went.

He really was quite surprised at the girls for wandering away from their mother. Aunt Petunia hadn't taken him on outings often, but when she had he'd always received a stern warning to stay close. Fearful that he might be left behind if he got separated from her side, Harry had always done just that.

One of his earliest complete memories was a trip to the supermarket. He and Dudley had been four, perhaps five at most. Petunia never seemed to want to hold his hand, or touch him in any way, but she didn't object to him holding on to the side of the shopping cart. Harry rather liked this, since it made his aunt easier to keep track of.

On that particular trip, he'd been with Aunt Petunia, clinging tightly to the side of the cart, while Dudley ran riot a few feet in front of them. His cousin had kicked and screamed to be let out until Petunia, never able to refuse Dudley anything, gave in and removed him from the cart's child seat. Harry remembered waiting hopefully, wondering if his aunt was going to offer him a chance to ride, but of course she didn't. The seat must remain available in case Duddykins got tired and wanted to reclaim it.

It had been about then that a stranger addressed them. Aunt Petunia had been inspecting the display of tinned vegetables, trying to decide if there was anything Dudley would eat, when another shopper stopped her own cart and reached for some corn. Glancing down the

aisle at Dudley, she had tutted disapprovingly. "It's disgraceful the way some people can't control their children," she had said, then beamed down at Harry. "I think that one could take some lessons from this little angel," she cooed, gently cupping his chin and tipping his head up slightly. "You're doing a wonderful job with him, dear. He's absolutely perfect--quiet, well mannered, and such beautiful green eyes."

Warmed by the unexpected praise, Harry had smiled shyly at the other woman. When she'd made her selection and went on her way, he'd looked up at his aunt, and been surprised at what he saw. Petunia's face was pale and pinched, her mouth flattened into a thin line, and she had angry spots of color in her cheeks that always meant trouble.

Harry hadn't understood. The lady had been nice. Why was she so upset? He'd been even more bewildered when they'd returned home. His aunt had rounded on him in a fury, and slapped him just as hard as she could. He'd been knocked off his feet by the force of her blow, and sat down with a thud on the kitchen floor.

"How dare you! How dare you! " Petunia had raged, as Harry looked up at her, tears of fright and pain filling his eyes.

"But I didn't do anything!" Harry had protested, stunned, confused, and a little angry. "That's not fair! I was being good. The lady said so. Dudley is the one who was bad! You should hit him, or yell at him or lock him in the cupboard!"

Petunia had paled, then flushed, then paled again. Harry looked at her fearfully, aware without really knowing how that he'd crossed a line. When she finally spoke, her face was drawn up in ugly sneer, and her words were cold and deliberate...

"You ungrateful, vicious little wretch! You want fair? Well I don't think that it's fair that you were dropped in my lap without so much as a by-your-leave when your fool parents got themselves killed. That "lady" is a nosey old parker who doesn't know what she's talking about. She doesn't know you like I do--doesn't have to live with your freakish abnormality every day. Beautiful green eyes indeed! And that scruffy

hair! You look like a common alley cat, and are about as well mannered as one, too! It disgusts me that you, who are absolutely dependent on my charity for your very survival, have the gall to insult my own son to my face!"

Harry shook his head slightly, and sighed as he continued up the street. That had been perhaps the first time he'd understood that something wasn't quite right--the first time he'd fully grasped that gaining acceptance would be difficult if not impossible in the Dursley household. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had always doted on their only child, and one of the unspoken rules of the house was "what Dudley wants, Dudley gets," but this--even in Harry's young mind--seemed far more serious than simple favoritism.

Harry had spent most of his subsequent time in the cupboard mulling over the event, and trying to make sense out of what had just happened. Then, as now he came up empty. Petunia's behavior was just plain weird.

Still, he didn't regret the incident. He was actually rather grateful to the stranger for her kind words, even if he had gotten in trouble. Chance encounters like the one in the tinned vegetables aisle, people like Mrs. Figg, and some of his more compassionate muggle teachers had given him something to hang on to. A second opinion of sorts. Any act of kindness or acceptance, no matter how small gave him hope that things could be better.

Through his strange awareness, Harry sensed early on that Vernon and Petunia resented his presence, but as a young boy, he had dared to hope that he could win his relatives' love if he just tried hard enough. Unfortunately, nothing he did seemed to please them. Oddly, his accomplishments seemed to annoy his aunt and uncle to no end, and heaven forbid if he excelled at something! When he held back a bit, it was better. The tension eased, and Petunia could happily heap loads of praise on Dudley. Finally, after years of striving toward an impossible goal, Harry had regretfully admitted defeat. He abandoned his dream of being accepted by the Dursleys, and began to simply stay out of their way.

Okay, that's enough. You're supposed to be looking for Kitty and Becky's mum, not feeling sorry for yourself! Pulling himself forcibly back to the present, Harry realized he'd reached the corner and stopped. He was just debating on which way to go, when the sounds of running footsteps and a woman's voice made him look up. This looks promising, Harry thought, observing a rather laden-down woman as she tore frantically up the side street to his right. He couldn't see her eyes or make out what she was saying at this distance, but her hair was dark. She was also pushing an umbrella stroller which had several shopping bags in the seat, and carried a diaper bag on one shoulder.

"Oh! Hello, excuse me," she called, spotting Harry, and running up to him. "Please! Have you seen two little girls?" She had a frantic, Oh-My-God-this-can't-be-happening air about her that Harry instantly sympathized with. He reckoned he had probably looked remarkably similar when he found 4 Privet Drive empty.

"Are you Kitty and Becky's mum?" Harry asked. He suspected that she was, judging by her possessions, and speech patterns, but had to make sure. Naming the girls would save time.

"Yes." The woman closed her eyes for a second in obvious relief, then opened them and peered anxiously at Harry. "Do you have them? Are they all right? Where are they?" she asked rapidly.

"They're just up the street," Harry said, pointing over his shoulder. "They wandered into the little pub and inn where I work--a place called the Leaky Cauldron," he elaborated, suddenly glad he hadn't bothered to remove his apron. "Mum" was eyeing him cautiously now, and the garment clearly stated he'd been working somewhere. After a few seconds she seemed to relax a bit, and allowed him to lead her back the way he'd come.

"I don't remember a place called The Leaky Cauldron." the woman finally ventured with a thoughtful frown after they'd walked a short distance in silence. "You'd think a name like that would stick with me."

"It's a small place--easy to miss," Harry shrugged, thinking furiously. How was he supposed to get "Mum" here, into the Leaky Cauldron if she couldn't see it? No, really ma'am, it's there. It's just invisible to non-magical folk like yourself. Yeah, right, Potter. Somehow I don't think she'd buy that. He wondered if he could just ask her to wait outside while he ran in and fetched the girls. Or maybe Tom would see them through the window, and let the kids out.

"Book store, book store, music store, theater, restaurant," his companion was muttering, obviously ticking off landmarks she remembered as they hurried up the street. Harry held his breath as they neared the pub. "Big book store, record shop--wait!" "Mum" stopped with an arrested expression on her face. "There it is! Cripes, I must have walked past it three times! Maybe I was looking at the map or something," she speculated, glancing at the hastily folded London street map that was untidily stuffed into one of the diaper bag's outer pockets.

"That must be it," Harry agreed trying not to sound too relieved. "Shall we?" he asked, opening the door, and gesturing for her to precede him.

The brunette nodded, and thanked him sincerely, before entering the pub and becoming the absolute center of attention.

Kitty and Becky brightened and shrieked "Mama!" when the jangling bells on the door caught their attention. Tom had settled them at a table with small glasses of pumpkin juice. Harry smiled as he watched the girls' mother hurry over and scoop them both up in her arms. When she had assured herself that her children were indeed fine, the dark haired woman shifted abruptly into "mommy mode." After settling the girls back in their seats, she stood with her arms akimbo and gave them a withering glare. "Katrina Nicole and Rebecca Marie Wright! What have I told you about staying close and not wandering off?" she demanded furiously.

Harry and Tom exchanged an amused look as Kitty and Becky shrank miserably in their seats. The whole scenario was eerily reminiscent of the time Fred, George, and Ron had fetched Harry

from Privet Drive summer before second year. The Weasley brothers had worn similar looks when their mother, Molly Weasley, came stalking across the yard to meet them once they'd arrived at the Burrow. Harry had been a little unnerved, and had not known what to make of Mrs. Weasley. In his experience, angry, raised voices were never a good sign.

After staying at the Burrow for a few days, Harry began to realize that the Weasley's handled crime and punishment differently than the Dursleys did. Harry had observed other families of course, but since he didn't have any muggle friends to speak of, this was the first time he'd ever seen this kind of parent-child interaction over a long period of time. He'd found it much more to his liking, but since he had very little to compare it to, he had reckoned it was unique to the Weasley household. A Molly thing.

Now, however, he was beginning to wonder if it was actually a Mummy thing instead. Unbidden, an image of Lily Potter filled his head. It wasn't the gentle, loving, parent he'd always envisioned, but the very picture of maternal ire--face flushed and green eyes snapping angrily. Harry shuddered slightly, and wondered how many times he would have faced his mother's wrath...or would James have been the primary disciplinarian...or would they have worked as a team?

A small sound drew his attention back the girls' table. Becky and Kitty were looking anxiously at their mother, who now had her head in her hands. She had evidently spent her anger, and now appeared to be on the verge of tears. She was trying very hard to keep herself together, but her success in the endeavor was far from assured. Again, because of his own experience a few days ago, Harry had an idea of what was happening. Now that the crisis was over, and the need to stay calm and act was gone, reaction was setting in. Hmm. Perhaps "Mum" needed a few minutes to herself...

Quietly, he walked to the table, and stood between Kitty and Becky's chairs, while Tom spoke quietly to "Mum" and guided her into a third chair. "I think your mum could do with a spot of tea," he suggested casually. "Perhaps a few biscuits. Why don't you come with me, so you can tell me what she likes."

He wasn't really sure if they'd consent to come with him, but Kitty and Becky had evidently deemed him trustworthy. They nodded solemnly, and stood, surprising Harry when they both reached up and grasped one of his hands like this was the most natural thing in the world to do. Well, okay, Katrina held his right hand, and Rebecca had his left index finger, and maybe it wasn't so surprising given the lecture they'd just received, but still! It was a completely foreign sensation, but not an unpleasant one, Harry mused, smiling down at their expectant faces. "Right, then," he said, unnecessarily, turning toward the kitchen.

"I don't like it," Sirius Black declared suddenly, scowling mistrustfully at the plan of operations for the attack on Privet Drive.

Remus looked up from helping Severus Snape draft interrogation questions for Peter Pettigrew. "What don't you like, Padfoot?"

"The plan is quite sound, Sirius," Dumbledore added. He, Arabella, and Arthur Weasley had been discussing the ramifications of Malfoy's report to Voldemort, and how to best protect the Burrow and the home of Amos Diggory.

"Well, yes, except for one complication," Sirius agreed, poking the parchment with his finger. "We've covered every last detail except how we're supposed to know when to act. Unless Voldemort is good enough to keep us up-to-date, all this is useless! We can't very well camp in the backyard until the bad guys show up, now can we?"

"Mmm," Snape said, frowning thoughtfully. "As much as it pains me to admit it, Black may have a point. The Dark Lord has been very secretive about his plans. Even the Death Eaters in his inner circle haven't been told when the attack will be." He shrugged, then continued. "There's every possibility that we won't be told. He could summon us, and dispatch us to Potter's home with no advance warning. If that happens I don't know if I would be able to spread the word."

"I am hopeful that Mr. Potter or yourself will be able to intercept the precise date beforehand," Albus responded, "but if you do not, the wards surrounding the property at 4 Privet Drive have not been dismantled. Arabella will know immediately if an unauthorized witch or wizard is in the neighborhood, and can sound the alarm with Flitwick's charmed parchment.

"You'd be essentially trapping Arabella in her house, Albus," Arthur pointed out. "Besides, she has to sleep sometime. If we aren't notified instantly, the Death Eaters could figure out that the house is unoccupied, and Disapparate."

"There are anti-Apparation wards that extend 50 meters from the house itself, but you have a valid point," the headmaster muttered. He frowned thoughtfully, stroking his long beard, then addressed the room at large. "Comments? Suggestions?"

Remus shrugged. "Post a guard. Have a rotating shift. That's essentially what Sirius and I have been doing since the last Order meeting. In fact, unless you have something else in mind for us, we could help out with this."

"The mirror in my lounge is charmed to show the exterior of the Dursley--uh, of 4 Privet Drive when requested. We could use that to keep an eye on the place. I justified it to the ministry because Harry spent a lot of time in the yard," she added, responding to the unspoken question from her companions, "I wanted to charm it to show me the interior from time to time, but I couldn't get permission. Unnecessary invasion of privacy."

"That shouldn't matter," Snape said dismissively. "According to Potter, the structure is vacant."

"Actually," Dumbledore said, peering through his half-moon glasses at Harry's letter, "Harry said 'my aunt and uncle have sold their property on Privet Drive. The house is currently vacant.'" He turned to Mrs. Figg. "You said you met an estate agent there today, is the house for sale, or sold?"

"The property was just for sale when I stopped by this afternoon," Arabella responded firmly. "The agent was in the middle of showing it when I arrived."

"Good," said Albus, looking grimly pleased. "A new family in that house would be an unqualified disaster. Arabella, when you return to Surrey, verify that the house has not yet sold. If it has not, cast a few aversion spells and muggle repelling charms. We need to make sure that house doesn't sell before Voldemort's minions show up. Once the attack is over, we will need to remove the charms and dismantle the wards in Surrey."

"And if it has sold?" Arabella pressed.

"Then we will allow the media to know that Harry's guardians have relocated."

"Is that wise, Albus? The Prophet has already started printing little digs about Harry and yourself."

"Let's hope it does not become necessary," Dumbledore said calmly.

Snape stood abruptly. "If we are finished here, Headmaster, I should be going. He will know if I kept him waiting without good cause, and I have finished the questions for Pettigrew."

"Very well, Severus. Good luck," Albus said, watching as the potions master stepped into the fireplace and was whisked back to his lab. "Perhaps we should adjourn for the evening and rest while we can," he suggested, turning back to the others. "We have reached a point where there is nothing to do but wait."

Arthur Weasley nodded tiredly. "All right, Albus, but please, make the call to Australia as soon as possible."

"I shall make the call in approximately four hours," the old wizard promised. Reassured, Arthur threw floo powder in the fireplace, and called for home.

"We'll need to pick up something to eat on the way," Arabella told Remus and Sirius, as they too prepared to leave. "I didn't visit the supermarket before I came here, and there isn't a speck of food in the house."

"You may stop by the kitchens if you wish," Albus offered helpfully, an amused twinkle in his bright blue eyes. "I believe Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin know the way. If that is not to your liking, there's always the Three Broomsticks, the Lion's Head, or the Leaky Cauldron."

Arabella's eyes lit up. "The Leaky Cauldron! Oh, I haven't seen Tom in ages!"

"Right then," Remus grinned. "Paddy, why don't you go back to the Dog Pound and get some clothes and things for us. Belle and I will get some take away at the Leaky Cauldron, and we'll meet back at her place."

Sirius didn't look altogether happy, but he nodded and moved to the fireplace. "Sounds like a plan."

"Wow," Kitty commented as they entered the kitchen. Harry grimaced a little, wondering if this had been such a great idea. Too late, as he was leading the girls across the dining room, he remembered that Tom's kitchen wasn't exactly normal by muggle standards. Oh, well. At least the dish brush isn't going.

Casting around for a distraction, he settled the girls at one of the worktables, and set to work. Well, that's one thing British wizards and muggles have in common, he reflected absently, thinking of Aunt Petunia on Dudley's eleventh birthday, Hagrid when Buckbeak had been condemned by the ministry, and the first Quidditch game he'd ever played for Gryffindor. When someone's upset, make strong, sweet tea.

The girls seemed more at ease now, and chatted happily with him until the subject of biscuits came up. When Harry had listed the choices currently available, the sisters had looked at each other, then

back at him. "Um, Sparky," Kitty said uncertainly. "Those are cookies."
"

Harry had barely been able to bite back his laughter. She was obviously confused, and just as obviously afraid she was going to hurt his feelings or insult him. "Cookies are more commonly known as biscuits here," he explained patiently, still smiling broadly. "I believe American biscuits are more like what we call scones here in England."

"How did you know we're from America? Are you magic?"

Harry nearly dropped the cannister of ginger snaps he was holding, then gave himself a mental slap. She didn't mean it that way, idiot, he scolded himself. Recovering, he replied, "Nothing special, I can tell by the way you talk." While the girl digested this, he set the tea and biscuits on the tray, and added a small flagon of pumpkin juice for Kitty and Becky. "Well I think that should do it. Shall we?"

As they re-entered the dining area, and approached the table where Kitty and Becky's mum was, Harry was gratified to see that she had rallied admirably while they'd been in the kitchen. "Better now?" he asked, setting the tea and cookies on the table, and refilling the girls' juice glasses.

"Yes, thank you," "Mum" said, looking a little embarrassed. Recovering, she held out her hand and smiled. "I don't believe I introduced myself to you earlier. I'm Janet Wright."

"Jim Patterson," Harry replied, taking the offered hand and giving it a firm shake, "but everyone calls me Sparky."

There weren't very many diners at the Cauldron just yet, so in between waiting on the other customers, Harry and Tom chatted with the Wrights. The family was indeed American, and had only just arrived in the U. K. Janet had accepted an overseas assignment with her company, and was due to start work in August. Her husband, Steve had been delayed, and would be joining them in a few days. She and the girls had decided to have an outing to escape the mess

their new house was currently in. "We're hip-deep in boxes," Janet said with a sigh, wrinkling her nose in disgust. "One of the many joys of moving."

"Have you moved around a lot then?" Harry asked. He found he rather liked Janet. She was open and friendly, and surprisingly easy to talk to.

"Yes, actually. My husband was in the military until just recently." Janet smiled at her daughters. "Kitty and Becky were born in two different states, but this is our first time overseas. I have to admit, I was thinking I'd made the worst mistake of my life earlier," she admitted. "You don't know what real fear is until you think your children may be missing. Thank you both so much for all your help."

"Think nothing of it, dear. We were happy to be of service," Tom said warmly. "This wasn't the first time a child has wandered in, and it certainly won't be the last. Now then," he said, standing and placing a companionable hand on Kitty's shoulder. "This fine young lady mentioned dinner. Can I interest you in something?"

"Mmm. Yes. I suppose I should act like a responsible parent and feed my children real food before letting them have cookies," Janet said, taking a sip from her mug. "What's available this evening?"

By the time Harry returned with the Wrights' order, the Leaky Cauldron's dinner and pub patrons began to trickle in. Harry had been a little concerned--afraid that the Wrights might be startled by the Cauldron's normal clientele--but Janet had seemed more amused than anything.

"Big city living," she had commented, shaking her head with a smile, when Harry brought out three plates of Tom's savory Shepherd's Pie. "You must get all kinds here."

"You have no idea," Harry had replied, smirking slightly. Actually, the Wrights had picked a good time to stumble onto the Leaky Cauldron. This evening's customers were more-or-less human in appearance,

there hadn't been any floo arrivals, and comparatively speaking, it was a fairly slow night.

Regardless Harry found himself on edge. Tom surely knew what he doing, but Harry still wondered what the other wizard was playing at. This had to be some violation of at least one wizarding bylaw. Then again, the Leaky Cauldron was a doorway of sorts between the muggle and magical worlds. Maybe Tom had muggle customers, or perhaps it was all right for the Wrights to stay because one or both of the girls showed signs of being magical. Or maybe Tom simply thought it better to serve them like any other customer because treating them otherwise would raise their suspicions.

Gah! Too many questions!

Harry decided he'd ask Tom if about it later. In the meantime the boy decided to keep an eye on the fireplaces, and the door that opened into Diagon Alley. A floo arrival, for example, would probably defy explanation. Hoping to be able to distract them if the need arose, Harry tried to busy himself as much as possible with chores near the Wrights' table. They had only just met, but he rather liked the family, and had no desire to see them Obliviated.

What Harry hadn't counted on was people from the Alley noticing his deferential attitude, and drawing entirely the wrong conclusion from it. Erin, the blonde clerk from Flourish & Blotts had been the first to comment. He'd just finished taking her and her friends' order and was walking away when she called after him, "It's nice that your family came to see you tonight, Sparky!"

Shocked witless, Harry had chosen to simply keep walking, pretending he hadn't heard. Erin's assumption wasn't unreasonable, he supposed. His dark hair and eyes gave him at least a superficial resemblance to Janet and her girls, but he hadn't expected this! It soon became obvious that he'd made a tactical error by not acknowledging Erin's comment, and correcting her straightaway. As he continued his circuit of the dining room, several witches and wizards who had overheard, smiled brightly at him.

"Lovely family, Sparky..."

"The little ones are just adorable..."

"Dad tied up tonight, Jim? That's a shame..."

After what seemed like an eternity, Harry finished checking his tables, and gratefully escaped into the kitchen.

This was a fine mess. A really fine mess. Any second now someone would probably want an introduction. Irritably, he slapped down the paper he had written Erin's table's order on, and stalked around the kitchen gathering items to fill it.

"Alright, Harry?" Tom asked, studying him curiously. "You look a little stressed."

Flustered, Harry put an order of Shepard's Pie on a serving tray, and flapped a hand in the direction of the dining room. "They think they're my family!" he finally blurted, with a pained look on his face.

"Sorry?" Tom said, confused.

"Some of the customers in the dining room think the Wrights are my family," Harry elaborated, fetching some chilled mugs and bottles of butterbeer. When the other wizard failed to look properly scandalized, he prompted, "Tom, this is bad!"

"Harry, it's a simple misunderstanding. I don't think Janet would hold it against you. I certainly didn't when she asked me if we were related."

"She asked...?" Harry swallowed and tried again. "You didn't mind?"

"Why would I mind? She and I talked a bit when you took the girls to the kitchen. She thought it was unusually perceptive of you to notice she needed a chance to collect herself, and I must agree. Why I would think anyone would be proud to claim you."

The boy shrugged noncommentally, recalling the Dursleys and how they reacted when asked if he, Harry was their son. He stood there,

sad-eyed and thoughtful for just a second, but Tom caught it. "Harry..."

"I should take this out," the Gryffindor said softly but firmly, cutting off Tom's comment. One side of his mouth quirked up, as he began to regain his normal good humor. "Erin will think I got lost," he quipped, turning and leaving the frustrated innkeeper in his wake.

After delivering the order, Harry noticed Janet trying to get his attention, and hurried over to her. "Ready to go are you?" he grinned. Kitty had scooted her chair over beside her mother, and was leaning heavily into her side, Becky had clambered onto Janet's lap, and was already sleeping deeply.

Janet nodded tiredly. "Yes. I need to get these two into bed, and I'm not far behind them." She glanced up at Harry and gave him a small smile. "I was going to unpack a little more, but I expended entirely too much energy being upset."

Harry nodded his understanding. "I'll just go get your tally, then," he said, wondering belatedly how, or even if muggle transactions were handled. Spotting Tom servicing another table, Harry went over to him.

"I keep it as simple as possible," Tom explained quietly, when Harry requested instructions. "Add up her order, round off to the nearest Galleon, and multiply by five. There's a bit of muggle money in the red box behind the bar if she needs change." Harry nodded and busied himself with re-writing the Wrights' order, and converting the wizard totals into pounds.

"Thanks, Spark, you're a prince," Janet said gratefully when Harry returned. "And even, too! How lucky is that!" she mused, digging through the diaper bag for her wallet, and counting out the required number of pounds.

Harry accepted the bills, then stood in front of the table, watching uncertainly as Janet tried to juggle bags, stroller and children without waking them. It was painfully obvious that she had more than she

could comfortably handle since Kitty was asleep. "Erm, Janet, not to be pushy or anything, but I could you use a hand?"

Janet glanced at the mostly asleep child to her right, and the unconscious toddler in her lap, then looked up at the anxious teenager in front of her. Grinning wryly up at him she said, "Actually, that would be wonderful, Sparky. If you don't mind that is."

"No trouble," Harry shrugged, with a tentative smile.

"Okay, first let's get Becky settled..."

Under Janet's direction, Harry laid her payment on the table, then removed the shopping bags from the umbrella stroller, lifted Rebecca, and strapped her into the conveyance.

"Poor things. Completely done in, aren't they?"

Janet looked up at Tom, and smiled ruefully. She had been trying without success to rouse her older daughter. "Wiped out," she agreed, before turning her attention back to Kitty. "Come on sweetie," she coaxed, trying to pull the sleepy child to her feet. "We have to go home now."

"Here, Janet, don't wake her," Tom said. "Sparky or I will be glad to help you get her out to your car."

"Thanks, but we're on foot," Janet said with a grimace, glancing at the dark street beyond the Leaky Cauldron's front window. "I didn't plan to stay this long, but I've just been enjoying being out. We don't live that far away, but I don't think I can carry the bags, and Katrina, and push Rebecca's stroller."

"We could phone for a cab, you know, or I could help you if you'd like," Harry offered quietly. Aware of Janet and Tom's amused looks he flushed slightly and mumbled, "Sorry, my aunt is always very fussy about propriety and manners. I meant no offense."

"None taken," Mrs. Wright was quick to assure. "I just find it amazing that you're so willing to help someone you don't even know."

Harry just shrugged again, looking rather abashed. How could he explain it? He did always seem to go rushing to the defense of others, but it was mostly because he knew how it felt to be bullied, trapped, and overwhelmed. He'd reacted without hesitation, almost without conscious thought when Draco Malfoy tried to take Neville Longbottom's Rememberall during their first flying lesson. Second year, he'd gone charging into the Chamber of Secrets when Ron's sister Ginny was in danger. Third year he'd run after Ron when Sirius (in his Animagus form) had dragged him into the passageway beneath the Whomping Willow. And with Janet...well Harry knew what it felt like to have more than a body could easily manage as well.

Tom pretended to appraise the dining room, then broke the awkward silence. "All right, I think I can spare you long enough to escort the ladies home...if that's agreeable with you of course?" he said addressing Janet. Harry squirmed under another one of her appraising stares, then she smiled, and nodded her consent. "Excellent! Come back to the kitchen for one quick minute Sparky," Tom said, walking in that direction and motioning for Harry to follow.

"Be right back," Harry told Janet, scooping up her payment, and trotting after Tom.

"Come here, lad," Tom said kindly, when Harry hesitantly entered behind him. "I just want to put a small tracking charm on you before you leave."

Harry paused in the act of removing his apron. "Tracking charm?"

"I don't expect you'll have any trouble, but if you do I'll be able to find you much more quickly. I'll just use a simple one that reports your location and status."

"Oh. Okay," Harry said uncertainly, as Tom took out his wand and tapped him on the head with it, then pointed the wand at the wall. Harry watched wonderingly as writing appeared:

Sparky:

Location: Leaky Cauldron (kitchen)

Status: Normal

"Alright?" Tom asked. "Nothing too personal, you see. Status will be 'Normal' unless you're in some sort of trouble."

Harry considered this a minute, then nodded. "Thanks, Tom. Oh, here," he said handing over Janet's money.

Tom accepted the bills then frowned at the boy. "Make sure you take care, Harry," he warned. "I'm not keen on you walking back by yourself after dark."

Janet had pulled Kitty into her lap, and was absently stroking her hair when Tom and Harry returned. She grinned sheepishly at the two wizards' amusement, and indicated her sleeping daughter. "Have to enjoy her while she still fits. Pretty soon she'll be Sparky's size, and much too cool for laps and cuddling."

After a little discussion about the best way to proceed, Tom lifted Kitty onto Harry's back, piggyback style, while Janet threaded the shopping bags onto the stroller's handles. Kitty protested a little at the shift, but was soon snoozing contentedly again on Harry's shoulder.

"Ready?" Harry asked. Janet nodded and started pushing the stroller towards the door. "Thanks again Tom," she threw over her shoulder. "You're a real lifesaver."

"Any time, dearie. Come again soon."

As Harry followed her, he heard the telltale popping that heralded a floo arrival. Close one! I couldn't have timed this better if I tried, he thought ironically, not knowing that Arabella Figg and Remus Lupin had just arrived.

Review this Story/Chapter

Chapter 15 - Mr. Wrong

Saturday, July 15, 1995

Arabella and Remus dusted themselves off, and moved away from the Leaky Cauldron's fireplace. "Tom!" Arabella called brightly, spotting the old innkeeper and hurrying toward him.

Tom turned from watching Harry and the Wrights exit into muggle London, and graced the witch with one of his toothless grins. "Well as I live and breathe! Arabella Figg! It's been ages! Here, this table is free," Tom began, starting to usher her over, but Belle stopped him.

"We can't stay, Tom," she said with a slightly apologetic look on her face. "I was hoping I could get some take away."

Tom looked up and saw Remus Lupin standing slightly behind Arabella. "Sorry Remus, I didn't see you there."

"It's all right, Tom, I usually try to keep a low profile."

Tom nodded his understanding. A restrictive new law concerning werewolves had been passed by the ministry a couple of years ago. Tom, himself, was of two minds about it. On one hand, no one could deny that werewolves were frightfully dangerous creatures, and should be treated with extreme caution. On the other hand, great strides had been made in the study of lycanthropy in recent years. The Wolfsbane Potion, for example, was a triumph in that regard, and afforded some measure of control to those unfortunate enough to suffer the curse.

Tom squirmed inwardly, as he invited Remus and Arabella to follow him over to the bar so they could sit while he took their order. He had been friendly with Sirius Black and James Potter during their Hogwarts years and after, so he had gotten to know their friends as well. It always amazed him that they were so comfortable in the company of a werewolf. Especially after James married Lily, and Harry came along.

Tom remembered once when the Marauders had come to the Leaky Cauldron for dinner. Lupin had finished first, and was holding Harry so James and Lily could eat. Harry had seemed perfectly content, but Tom recalled having to squash a mad urge to snatch the baby out of the werewolf's arms, and scold the parents roundly for being so careless. It was a maddening dichotomy. He had grown to like Remus Lupin over the years, but evidently some prejudices were easier to overcome than others.

Remus and Arabella were seated now, and looking at him expectantly. Tom shook his head a little, then smiled at them. "Sorry. My mind wandered there for a minute. So, what can I get for you? The Shepherd's Pie has been very popular tonight," he offered.

Arabella glanced at Remus who shrugged amiably. Shepherd's Pie sounded fine to him. "That sounds fine, Tom. We'll take three orders, and six bottles of butterbeer," Mrs. Figg decided. "And that will be all unless you happen to have something that will do for breakfast."

"As a matter of fact, I have some lovely currant buns in the kitchen, but they're still rising. If it isn't too much trouble, you could nip 'round tomorrow."

Mrs. Figg smiled. "Yes, or I could just go shopping." At Tom's politely interested look she elaborated, "I've been away for the last couple of weeks, and desperately need to re-stock the pantry."

Tom chuckled. "Right, then," he said, disappearing into the kitchen.

The two sat in silence for a few minutes, waiting for Tom's return. Belle couldn't help but notice Remus seemed to be sniffing a little. Finally her curiosity got the better of her. "Catching a cold, Remus, or do you need a hanky?"

Lupin sniffed again, then blinked at her. "What? Oh. No. Sorry, I caught a scent that's awfully familiar, but I lost it..." Remus trailed off frowning, then shook his head. "There are too many smells in here--its confusing."

"I thought you keep a charm on your nose to block that out," Arabella said, lowering her voice so no one would overhear.

"I do right before the full moon. That's when the wolf traits are at their peak, but even then I don't completely cut off my sense of smell," Remus said with a shudder. "That would be about the same as going blind. I just tone it down to a more manageable level."

"But what about enhanced senses, and the unfair advantage the ministry was going on about?"

Remus sighed. "That's a very good example of the saying 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.' It's true that I'm stronger than the average person my size, my senses are sharper, and I tend to be able to pick up on others' moods. These are advantageous, yes, but what people fail to take into consideration, is my human form is nowhere near as efficient as my wolf shape.

"My sense of smell is enhanced, for example, but humans really do have a pathetic sense of smell as compared to other animals. I can identify scents, which is more than most can do, but it's hard to process. Especially in an environment like this with the food, the smoke, people coming and going... Moony or Snuffles would be able to pick out the scent, identify it, determine its age, follow its trail if necessary." The werewolf tested the air again, then shook his head and shrugged dismissively. "It will come to me. This usually happens when I catch a whiff of someone I know that I haven't seen in a while."

Arabella nodded her understanding then the two settled into a comfortable silence. Smiling softly, Arabella looked around the Leaky Cauldron, reacquainting herself with its interior. It hadn't changed much since the last time she'd been in, but something seemed different. Actually, Belle noticed admiringly, the whole place was looking really nice. Rising from her seat, she turned in a slow circle, taking in the main dining area, and bar.

In the course of her inspection, her eyes fell on Tom's guest book, laying open, ready to be signed. Struck by an inspiration, she casually walked over to it. Witches and wizards often consulted the

log to see if any of their friends were in the Alley, so no one would think her actions odd. A glance at the current page showed the guests from late June to the present--and Harry was not among them.

Remus arched an eyebrow when she returned to her seat. "Anything?" he asked hopefully.

Mrs. Figg shook her head, feeling stupid for even trying. "No. I just thought perhaps..." she trailed off and sighed. "The whole thing just infuriates me," she snapped bitterly.

"What's that dear?" Tom asked conversationally, returning with their order floating gracefully before him.

Lupin and Figg exchanged a glance. They had wondered if Harry had gone to Diagon Alley before leaving. If he had, the old innkeeper was sure to know about it. However, they were on strict orders to keep quiet until Voldemort made his move, and that made them reluctant to ask. They couldn't afford word getting around that Harry's muggle relatives had relocated. Not yet, at least. Besides, they could ask Harry personally in a couple of days--provided there was anything left after Albus, Sirius, and Molly finished with him.

Forcing a smile, Arabella waved an airy hand. "I'm having some difficulty with one of my muggle neighbors," she extemporized. "Quite annoying, really, not being able to hex them properly."

Tom smiled back at her. "Temper, temper, Mrs. Figg," he teased, before becoming more brisk and businesslike. "Here's your order," he said unnecessarily, as the neatly wrapped bundles landed on the bar. "Could I get you anything else? Treacle Pudding, perhaps?" he nudged, shamelessly tempting Remus, who he knew had a fondness for the dessert. He knew he'd been successful when the man's amber eyes lit up.

"How much?" Lupin asked, reaching into a pocket and pulling out a few coins.

"For you, three Sickles," Tom waved his wand, and an additional package which had been hovering behind his back joined the others

on the bar. "I took the liberty of dishing it up when I filled the rest of your order," he grinned.

"You know me too well, Tom," the werewolf said sheepishly. "I'm not sure this is a good thing."

"Nonsense! It's good business, my boy, that's all," Tom assured him. "People notice when you make an effort to recall their names and likes and dislikes. It isn't that much trouble, and it gives the Cauldron an edge over some of the larger, fancier places."

Remus smiled, and sniffed the Shepherd's Pie and Treacle Pudding appreciatively. Turning, he slanted a mischievous look at his companion, and wagged his eyebrows. "Can we have dessert first Arabella? Please?"

Belle rolled her eyes in an eloquent "Why me" gesture, then smiled and shook her head fondly, as she and Remus counted out their payment. "By the way, Tom," she said, as she picked up the pudding and the butterbeer, "I love what you've done with the place."

"Ah, yes," Tom beamed proudly. "Well I can't take all the credit for that. I hired some help for the summer, and its been one of the best decisions I ever made."

Remus picked up the Shepherds Pie as they prepared to leave, then looked hopefully at Mrs. Figg. "Is that too much for you to carry, Arabella? I could carry some more," he offered, looking pointedly at the order of dessert.

Mrs. Figg gave him an ironic look. "I'm not daft or thick, Remus Lupin. If I let you anywhere near this pudding it will be gone before we get home."

"But we're apparating!"

"I'm sure you'd manage."

Remus balanced the food on his left hand, and put his right hand over his heart. "Arabella! You wound me!"

"No, I know you, and mind you don't drop that," Belle said with a wicked smile. "Goodbye, Tom. Thanks for everything."

"Goodbye, you two. Come again soon for a proper visit," Tom chided gently as the pair took their leave.

"We will, Tom," Arabella promised as she and Remus stepped through the door leading to Diagon Alley, and Apparated back to Little Whinging.

Severus Snape closed his eyes against the rush of wind and color as he clutched Voldemort's portkey in one hand, and a small case containing his notes, and an assortment of potions in the other. Vaguely, he wondered where he would land.

Albus had wanted to put a small tracking charm on him, but as usual Snape had refused. Now he wondered if he might have been a bit hasty. He had been in transit an awfully long time, and had no idea where he might end up. Voldemort had been known to portkey unsuspecting victims into all sorts of unpleasant places, with results both fatal and not. The Potions Master could still remember one unfortunate who's portkey had dumped him into an active volcano. The silly sot had been flash-fried before he even realized he was in danger.

Severus didn't think he was doomed to meet the same end. Not this trip anyway. Voldemort needed him to administer the memory potion and question Wormtail. Snape shuddered in spite of himself. If the dark wizard ever found out the extent of his duplicity, Voldemort would probably take obscene pleasure in sending him back to Albus one piece at a time. Snape quickly clamped off that train of thought. No, he wouldn't speculate. He would need his wits about him when he arrived at where ever he was going, and that certainly wouldn't happen if he reduced himself to babbling hysteria. It was enough to say that his death would not be easy, or quick.

Unless he took matters into his own hands, of course. No, if things got to that point he would die on his own terms. Since taking up the

mantle of spy again, Severus had begun carrying a tiny vial of one of the deadliest poisons known to wizard kind. It was odorless, tasteless, nearly instantaneous, one small dose would do the job, and there was no known antidote. He hoped it wouldn't become necessary, but it was always best to be prepared.

The trip ended with characteristic suddenness. Snape felt his feet slam into the ground, and fought to keep his balance. Portkey travelers, more often than not, overbalanced when they arrived at their destination, and ended up sprawled on the ground in an ungainly heap. It might seem silly to some, but dignity was very important to the Potion Master.

When he regained his equilibrium, he looked around and found himself in a rather ramshackle cottage. Strange. He had expected to land at the manor house Voldemort had been using as headquarters, but no matter. Voldemort was sitting in a comfortable-looking chair by the fire, and Wormtail was squeezed into a corner, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

"Welcome, Severus," Voldemort said, his red eyes bright with anticipation.

Obediently, Snape knelt at his "master's" feet. "My lord," he replied simply.

"I trust your delay was justified," the dark wizard prodded, making the fine hairs on Severus's neck stand on end. "I do not appreciate being kept waiting."

"Yes, my lord. I had an opportunity to test the potion on another animagus."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at Snape's bowed head. "And you exploited this opportunity, I trust?"

"I observed the effects of the potion, and composed some questions that may be useful for getting the information you desire in the shortest possible time, Master."

"Ah, Severus, always the scholar," Voldemort said in a disappointed tone, lifting his wand in a threatening manner. "You had a witch or wizard helpless before you! Did it not occur to you to determine if they had any useful knowledge?"

Snape was sure his "master" was about two seconds from punishing him with the Cruciatus Curse. At times like this he missed Albus more than he could express. "It did, my lord, but I was in a meeting in the headmaster's office," he said hastily, hoping to deflect Voldemort's anger. "It came up completely by chance, due to a random twist of conversation. I could not question him as I wished with so many witnesses, and it would have taken even more time if I'd tried to get him alone."

Voldemort was silent for a time, obviously trying to find fault with what Snape reported. Finally, he lowered his wand, and laid it across his lap. "Very well, but know I expect better from you in the future. Rise, Severus. Let us begin."

"Yes, my lord," Snape replied, standing in a swirl of black robes, and smoothing his windblown hair. Turning to the other wizard in the room, he nodded curtly, "Wormtail."

Reluctantly, Peter Pettigrew came forward. "Snape," he responded in kind.

"May I transfigure some chairs, Master?" Snape remembered to ask, just as he had been about to Accio some pieces of firewood over for that purpose. At Voldemort's lofty wave of permission, he pointed his wand at the woodpile, and summoned three pieces of kindling over. Soon, he and Peter were seated in two rather utilitarian chairs with a sturdy table between them. He allowed himself a second to sneer at the memory of James Potter. Whatever else the man was, he was excellent at Transfiguration. He would have conjured up a furniture grouping that looked like it was taken straight from Buckingham Palace just to show that he could.

Bah! James Potter is the least of your worries, Severus. If you want to live through this war you'd do well to remember that. Snape

counseled himself, reaching for his case, and lining up his potion bottles on the table.

"Drink this," he ordered without preamble, holding out a dose of the orange memory potion.

Peter gingerly took the vial and looked at it mistrustfully. His reaction was so similar to Black's, that Snape found himself fighting to keep a straight face. Even after all these years, the members of Potter's little gang still acted like they expected him to poison them given any opportunity.

Inwardly, Severus squirmed a little. Fifteen or twenty years ago their fears wouldn't have been groundless. He'd been an angry, misunderstood, and tormented youth. Given the chance, he would have force fed the lot of them the vilest poison he could find, and laughed while they died in agony.

"Are you waiting for any particular occasion, Wormtail," Voldemort asked impatiently, startling the two wizards at the table.

"I have no guarantees that this potion is safe, my lord. Snape has always hated me." Peter protested in an uncharacteristically bold manner. Rat's survival instinct, the potion master supposed, wondering not for the first time how Pettigrew had managed to befriend Black, Potter, and Lupin.

"Severus does not have permission to kill you," Voldemort said, dismissing Pettigrew's concerns, and interrupting Snape's musings. When Pettigrew still hesitated, he growled, "Although that could change."

The Dark Lord's threat was not lost on the former marauder. Peter grasped the vial in his new silver hand, and quickly drank the contents down.

Snape observed clinically as the potion began to take effect. Initially, Pettigrew closed his eyes, and swayed slightly in his seat as Black had done, but that's where the similarities ended. When Black had been firmly under the potion's power, his face had lit up with awe and

wonder. Traces of anger, sadness, and regret could be seen occasionally, but on the whole he had been calm, as though he was comforted by the memories of his more carefree days. Perhaps he still had difficulty remembering the good times prior to the Potters' murder, and Azkaban.

Pettigrew by contrast, looked pained and regretful. Frowning, Snape watched warily as the other wizard broke into a cold sweat and began to shake his head and mutter denials. "Damn," he muttered furiously, even as his fingers automatically sought out a vial of Calming Potion. Why can't anything ever be easy? he snarled irritably, roughly prying Peter's clenched teeth apart, and pouring the potion down his throat.

"So tell me about yourself," Janet suggested, as she and Harry made their way up the street. "You and Tom know all about me, so it's your turn."

"Not much to tell, really," the boy responded, with a grin. "I go to boarding school, and I have a summer job at the Leaky Cauldron."

"Do you have any hobbies, or interests?"

Harry shrugged. "I like sports," he said, after a minute. "I play on my House team at school."

"House?"

Harry nodded. "There are four houses within my school. Students are assigned a house in their first year." Janet nodded encouragingly, so he went on.

"Every year there are two competitions. One is which team does the best, and the other is the House Cup. The points earned by the House teams are added to any points students earn with correct answers and proper behavior. Points are lost if students are caught breaking rules or misbehaving. Whichever house has the most points at the end of the year wins."

"And has your house won?"

Beaming, Harry nodded.

"So what about your family?" Janet asked innocently. She knew immediately she had hit a nerve when Harry's jaw unconsciously tightened. She wasn't sure if he would answer, but after a few seconds he said, "My parents were killed when I was a baby. I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle."

Sensing this was not a comfortable subject, Janet nodded. Reaching out, she gave his arm a little squeeze. "I'm sorry about your parents, Jim," she said, then delicately let the subject drop.

"Janet?" he ventured after they had walked a little way in silence. It felt a little odd to be addressing her in this manner, but she had insisted.

"Hmm?"

"I want to ask you something, but I'm afraid it's going to come out sounding insulting."

Jan's lips twitched in amusement. "Well, since you're obviously dying to ask, I'll try not to be insulted."

Harry blew his breath out through his teeth, then decided the direct approach was probably best. "I was just wondering...can you tell me why you trust me? I--I mean...well...it's just that..."

"No, it's all right. I understand," Janet said, with a thoughtful frown, "and it's a fair question. I'm not usually this comfortable with someone I've just met," she said, smiling sheepishly up at Harry.

"Me either."

"I'm afraid I really can't give you a definitive answer. This may sound a little, well, strange, because it's more feelings than facts," Janet continued, after a minute. "I don't completely understand it myself."

Now it was Harry's turn to nod encouragingly.

"All I know is this afternoon I was more scared than I had ever been in my life. I was running up the street, and I couldn't see the girls anywhere and..." Janet trailed off, apparently having lost her nerve.

"You're killing me here," Harry finally prodded. "Come on, I promise I won't laugh," he coaxed when she continued to hesitate.

I'm less worried about you laughing, and more worried about you running away in terror with my kid still on your back."

Harry grinned at her. "Won't happen," he declared firmly, shifting Kitty to a more comfortable position. "My headmaster once awarded me sixty points for 'pure nerve and outstanding courage.'"

"Did he now?"

"Yeah. Long story."

"I'll bet. I'd like to hear it sometime," Janet smiled. She walked a little farther, then realized Harry was still waiting for her explanation. "Look, I don't know what happened, okay?" she finally said, looking more than a little frustrated. "It might have been gut instinct, or a lucky guess, or I might have had a psychic moment." She stopped Becky's stroller and flung her arms wide. "My guardian angel could have whispered in my ear, for all I know. The only thing I'm sure of, is this afternoon, when I saw you on the street, I knew somehow that you were okay, and you'd be able to help me." She crossed her arms and looked up at Harry, as though expecting him to scoff. "Well, go on. Say it," she prompted impatiently. "I know it sounds crazy."

Harry shrugged helplessly, not really knowing what to say. It didn't sound any crazier than about half a dozen things he could think of offhand. Actually, he could kind of identify with what she was describing. He'd only managed to confuse and frustrate Hermione and Ron the times he'd tried to describe how things just came to him, sometimes. "So, erm, has this ever happened before?" he ventured, when Janet grasped the stroller handles and continued up the street.

Surprised, Janet stared at him a second, then relaxed fractionally, and shrugged. "Maybe," she said consideringly. "It's hard to say for sure. My gut feelings are usually right, but not always. It could be coincidence. And even if it is some kind of weird perception, they're few and far between."

Divination wasn't exactly Harry's favorite class, but he was interested in spite of himself. "So is it just people, then?" he asked, thinking of his own capricious gift.

"No," Janet said thoughtfully, amazed that he'd picked up the thread of the conversation, and relieved that he wasn't looking at her like she'd grown another head. Most of the males she knew, especially the young ones, were uncomfortable with the subject, or tended to laugh it off. "It can be locations, objects... Once I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I had a letter from my boyfriend at the time in the mailbox, and furthermore, I knew I was not going to like what he had to say."

"And were you right?"

"Yeah...but I remember that incident because it was unusual. Most of the time it isn't that precise," Janet paused, remembering for a second, then threw Harry a mischievous look. "It would be nice if I could tune in to useful information for a change. Winning lottery numbers, for example."

"Yeah," Harry laughed, "that would be cool."

They talked of little, inconsequential things after that, and all too soon they rounded one last corner, and Janet stopped Becky's stroller in front of a modest townhouse. "Here we are," she said, with a flourish.

Harry nodded. "Nice place," he said with a smile.

"Well it will be, once we finish unpacking," Jan commented wryly, fumbling for her keys. "It looks more like a box factory than a home at the moment." She looked at Harry speculatively and seemed to debate with herself for a minute. "If you have the time and can put up with the mess, you'll have to come by and see us," she finally offered.

"I'd like that, thank you," Harry said honestly. "But only if you agree to come see me at the Leaky Cauldron as well!"

"Oh, we will. Don't worry about that," Jan beamed. "I can't wait for my husband, Steve, to get here. I'm sure he'll love it, too. Oh!" she exclaimed softly. "Kitty must be getting heavy, and Tom is expecting you back, and I'm chattering on..."

Harry watched her open the door, turn on the lights, then lift the stroller, bags, Becky, and all over the threshold. When this was done, she turned back to him, and plucked her noodle-limp daughter off his back. "There are times I'm grateful she sleeps like a rock," Janet said fondly, raising Kitty up so she could kiss her forehead.

"Alright, then?" Harry asked, feeling a little useless now that he wasn't carrying Kitty anymore.

"Yeah. Thanks again for being such a big help."

"It was nothing," Harry shrugged good naturedly. "That's what friends are for, right?" he asked hesitantly.

"Absolutely," Janet replied firmly. She shifted Kitty slightly, then shrugged and grinned up at him. "I'd shake on it, but my hands are full."

"I noticed," Harry observed dryly, as he returned her smile. "Next time, then?" he asked, still a little unsure of himself as he turned to go.

"You've got it." Janet said, watching from her doorway as he started back toward the Leaky Cauldron. When he reached the intersection, he paused long enough to wave and call "Sleep well!" over his shoulder before turning the corner, and vanishing from sight. That's one heck of a nice kid, she mused, closing the door, and setting about putting her sleeping daughters to bed.

Snape was not in a good mood. This was not going the way he'd hoped.

Note to self: Memory Potion should not be mixed with Calming Potion. Ever.

Peter had responded to the Calming Potion, then proceeded to be spectacularly sick. Snape hadn't been expecting this, but, he really should have. It was only natural for Pettigrew to have a weak stomach after all.

Luckily, his case was full of all sorts of potions, draughts, and elixirs. One never knew when they might come in handy, after all. After a couple of false starts, he hit upon the correct combination of remedies that would allow him to administer the Memory Potion successfully, and Peter was now sitting dreamily before him.

Irritably, Severus reached for his wand, and muttered some cleaning charms. A keen sense of smell was useful in potion-making, but right now it was rather distracting. When the immediate area was at least tolerable, he turned back to the dark wizard. "I believe we are ready to begin, Master."

"Excellent, Severus. Proceed," Voldemort instructed, laying aside the copy of the Daily Prophet he'd been reading. The Dark Lord had been uncharacteristically tolerant of the delays. He hadn't cast the Cruciatus Curse even once. Evidently he had anticipated that this to take a while, and had come prepared.

Or else he realized that having to deal with a sick person was adequate punishment for the rather fastidious potion master.

Pushing aside his uncharitable thoughts, Snape nodded, and turned back to Wormtail. "Can you hear me?"

There was a pause before Peter answered. "Yes." Like Black, his attention seemed riveted elsewhere, almost like he had to make an effort to return to the present. Fascinating.

"I need you to remember fall of 1981," Snape prompted. "After you framed Black, blew up the street, and escaped in your rat form."

"No, I'd really rather not. Can we talk about how I became an animagus instead?"

Snape blinked. He hadn't expected resistance. Backing up, he tried a different approach. It had been his intent to guide Pettigrew from his escape down the sewers to his adoption by the Weasleys. Perhaps he could skip ahead a few questions. "How did you come to live in the Weasley household?"

"I chanced upon the family in Diagon Alley. Their son Percy wanted a pet, and was causing a bit of a scene. He was feeling a little isolated. The two oldest brothers were close, the twins were inseparable, Ron was just a year old at time, and his parents' attention was focused on the new baby girl. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately for me, the family was a little short on funds, and couldn't really afford frivolities like pets. It was easy to ingratiate myself to the boy. He was only five or so at the time. I made him happy, and his parents allowed him to keep me."

"So you started out as Percy Weasley's rat? How did you wind up with Ronald Weasley?"

"Percy Weasley was made a school prefect his fifth year. His parents bought him an owl for the occasion. Ronald was just getting ready to start his first year at Hogwarts, so I was given to him. The Weasleys don't believe in wasting anything."

"I see. So when did Ronald happen to meet Harry Potter?"

"Harry came up to the Weasley family as they were preparing to cross the barrier leading to Platform 9^¾. I recognized him almost immediately, of course. Even before I saw him. There's something of James and Lily in his scent. He hadn't been told how to get onto the platform, so Molly told him what to do. I didn't see him again until Ron boarded the train. All the other compartments were full, so he wound up sitting with Harry."

"And they became friends during the course of the year?"

"Yes. Ron and Harry became inseparable almost immediately. After Halloween, they became chummy with another first year named Hermione Granger."

"Yes," Snape replied drily. "So at the end of the year, the three made plans to visit one another?"

"Yes. Ron asked his mother straightaway if Harry could come to stay. She agreed, and a week or so later, he sent his first invitation. A few days later, he sent another. It went on like that for a couple of weeks."

"Potter didn't respond?"

"No. The rest of the family were puzzled, but shrugged it off. They thought Harry must have changed his mind, or was perhaps on holiday or otherwise unavailable. Only Ron and the twins seemed to think something was wrong."

"Why did they suspect?" Snape asked before he could stop himself. This question wasn't entirely relevant to the matter at hand, but Arthur Weasley's story was still nagging at him.

Fortunately, neither Voldemort nor Wormtail seemed to notice.

"Harry told Ron a bit about his home life, although I could tell he held back quite a bit. Fred and George knew Harry was responsible and dependable from being on the Quidditch team with him. Besides, they knew he wanted to visit, so his silence seemed suspicious," Peter was reporting candidly.

"How did they find his address?" Severus asked, beginning to drive toward his goal. Potter's records at the ministry were sealed, and his whereabouts were almost a state secret.

"Harry gave it to Ron before they left Hogwarts."

Snape nodded, barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes in disgust. Obviously. Evidently no one bothered to tell Potter that he shouldn't hand his address out. Of course at the time, it hadn't been that much of an issue. "And what was the address?"

"...I don't remember."

"Concentrate, man! This is important. They must have mentioned where they were going."

"It was...near London. Surrey, I believe. Yes, Surrey. They were talking and eating Bertie Bott's every flavor beans. I'd found a strawberry flavored one, and was eating it while they were talking. They were trying to determine if the car had enough fuel to get there and back."

"Where in Surrey does Potter live?" Severus pressed, chancing a nervous glance at Voldemort out of the corner of his eye. The Dark Lord was sitting on the edge of his seat now, his eyes intense with anticipation.

"Does it matter? The beans were much more interesting. They also had some of Molly's ginger snaps and cold pumpkin juice. Ron was always very good about sharing with me. Percy took good care of me, but he always expected me to sleep in a cage and eat rat food."

"It matters a great deal," Severus snapped irritably. Leaning close he hissed in Peter's ear, "You remember the Cruciatus Curse don't you? Because I can guarantee you're about to become reacquainted with it if you don't stop thinking with your stomach and concentrate!"

Peter blinked up at him fearfully, shocked out of his reminiscence. Fortunately, the Calming Potion did its job, so he didn't suffer another panic attack, but he paled slightly, and broke into a light sweat. Closing his eyes, he tried to concentrate.

"We'll take it one step at a time. This may help," Snape said, trying to be reassuring, as he took a magical atlas out of his case. The book had pre-printed maps, and several work pages that witches and wizards could use to conjure directions, routes, and so on. He flipped through it until he found a rather detailed map of Surrey, England and put it on the table in front of Wormtail. "Which village in Surrey does Potter live in?"

"It had a funny name," Peter said, frowning at the list of towns that accompanied the map. "Crying...complaining...no! Whinging! Little Whinging! Right here!" he exclaimed, pointing a triumphant finger.

"Excellent. Now the address?" Snape pressed implacably.

"Address?" Peter squeaked, aghast. He ran his fingers through his thinning hair, then squeaked again in fright when he caught sight of Voldemort impatiently tapping his wand on the arm of his chair. By the look in the dark wizard's red eyes, he was just about at the end of his patience, and more than ready to start hurling curses.

Swallowing audibly, Pettigrew locked eyes with Snape, silently pleading for help. The Hogwarts professor frowned and consulted his prepared questions again. If he wasn't mistaken, they had anticipated Peter might falter at the address. Now it was time for some artfully leading questions. He couldn't make it too easy, or Voldemort might catch on to the fact that he, Severus, knew Potter's address.

Turning to a work page, he tapped the atlas with his wand, and said, "Tabula Via* Little Whinging." An alphabetical list of street names began to appear on the page.

Wormtail scanned the list once, twice, then raked his fingers through his hair again. "I don't remember!" he wailed hysterically. "I can't remember!"

Ah. The Calming Potion must be wearing off. Snape automatically reached for the vials needed for a second dose, but Voldemort stopped him.

"Don't bother, Severus. Crucio! " he commanded, pointing his wand at the cowering wizard.

Snape tried not to wince too noticeably when the curse slammed into Pettigrew, fueled by Voldemort's anger and frustration. The little rat-faced man howled in pain for almost a full minute, before the dark lord relented, and released him from the curse. When it was over, he was pale and shaking, but, to give credit where it was due, Snape had to admit, Peter wasn't babbling anymore. The Cruciatus Curse

was a bit much, though. A sharp slap across the mouth probably would have sufficed.

Now it was time to drop the hint. "If I may, Master," he said respectfully to Voldemort, "Wormtail seems to be...over stressed. Perhaps he might remember if we let him have a little privacy."

"He has two minutes," Voldemort growled menacingly. "After that, he will have outlived his usefulness."

Well, that's done it, Snape thought bitterly, as he discreetly watched Pettigrew blanch and begin to sweat even more profusely. He was certain the other wizard was terrorized beyond logical thought, but suddenly Peter's eyes lit up. Severus smiled inwardly, pleased he had taken the bait. Maybe, just maybe...

"Privacy, privacy..." Peter muttered desperately, with the air of a man who was just on the verge of recalling something. "No...not privacy. Private. Yes. Private. That sounds right..." he muttered, looking more closely at the P's. "Primrose, Princeton...PRIVET!" Wormtail jumped out of his chair in excitement. "PRIVET!" he exclaimed again. "PRIVET DRIVE! Harry Potter lives with Vernon and Petunia Dursley at NUMBER FOUR PRIVET DRIVE!" he crowed in victory, before crumpling to the floor in a dead faint.

* Tabula Via - Latin for "List Street"

Chapter 16 - Dream Time

Saturday, July 15, 1995

Harry rubbed his eyes as he sat at his desk trying to finish the correspondence he'd started before dinner. His "sample" letter had been most helpful, although he tried to refrain from copying it word-for-word and sending it to everyone.

His trip back to the Leaky Cauldron from Janet's house had been largely uneventful, if you didn't count his being openly propositioned about a block away from his destination. Harry snickered a little as he finished up Hermione's letter, deciding he probably shouldn't share that bit of news. It would be difficult to explain why he'd been out in London after dark, and his friends probably wouldn't believe it, anyway.

Once Harry had gotten back to the Leaky Cauldron, he had quietly re-entered the pub through the London door. It had been left slightly ajar again, so he had gently pushed it open without disturbing the bells. Absently, he had noted that the dining room was empty. A glance at the clock confirmed that Tom had stopped serving dinner while he was gone. All the customers were in the bar area now.

Harry had headed for the kitchen, staying close to the wall as was his habit, but Tom had evidently been watching for him. The Gryffindor had intended to retrieve his apron and start tidying up for the night, but his boss intercepted him.

"Don't bother."

The innkeeper's voice had startled Harry, making him freeze in the act of reaching for the garment. The for a comic-horrible moment boy wondered if he was being sacked, but the other wizard didn't seem angry.

"There isn't a lot left to do," Tom had continued with a shrug. "You did a good job of keeping the floor swept and tables cleared this evening, and since you came down early, you've put in your required hours. Besides, there are about half a dozen people in the bar that saw you

leave with the Wrights, and think you're gone for the night. It would seem odd if you popped up again."

"Oh. Sorry about that."

"There's no harm done. I should probably get back to the bar, but there are a few things I need to talk to you about. It's nothing horrible," Tom quickly assured, when Harry looked up sharply. "Would you mind terribly coming down a little early tomorrow morning?"

"Not at all," the younger wizard had said, and to his own surprise, he'd really meant it. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew what Tom wanted to discuss, and found he couldn't begrudge the man a few answers. The old innkeeper had been more than patient with him.

Putting down his quill, the boy stretched his fingers briefly before reaching for a biscuit. Tom had seemed to feel bad about sending Harry to his room, so he'd given him some ginger snaps, and some milk in a glass charmed to stay cold before chivvying him up the stairs.

Not really in the mood to do homework, Harry had decided to try and finish his letters, then maybe poke through the box from Mrs. Figg's house some more. Now he was beginning to wonder if he was going to be able to stay awake long enough to do either. It was embarrassingly early to be so tired--if he was at the Burrow he'd be teased unmercifully-- but in all fairness, it had been a rather busy day. It was probably safe to say that he'd exceeded the recommended daily allowance of shocks: Fawkes, Dumbledore's package, the box from Mrs. Figg's house, Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Reed, Mrs. Wright and her girls...not to mention all the unpacking and lifting and running and hauling he'd done. No wonder his body was craving sleep! He stretched, trying to muster some energy, but nothing seemed to be working. He had just about decided to give up and go to bed, when a familiar prickle on his forehead made him pause. Uh-oh!

Harry grimaced, and rubbed distractedly at his scar. On second thought, now wouldn't be the best time to drop off. It was probably just as well that Tom had sent him to his room as well. After the last

couple of weeks he'd learned to recognize when his link with Voldemort was becoming active, and now was one of those times.

So far, Harry had been lucky. He knew from recent experience that his lightning-shaped scar was capable of inflicting blinding pain when the circumstances were right. Having experienced both, Harry would have difficulty deciding which was worse--scar pain, or having the Cruciatus Curse cast on him. Fortunately, he hadn't had to cope with either since the night of the Third Task. "Eavesdropping" on his arch enemy just made his scar burn annoyingly on his forehead. The intensity varied with Voldemort's mood, of course, but so far it hadn't been anything he couldn't handle. At best it was barely noticeable, at worst it was roughly comparable to a bad sinus or tension headache.

One thing Harry had noticed since he'd started paying attention, was the symptoms usually came on gradually, almost as if his link with Voldemort needed to "warm up" before it could function properly. Back when he'd been working nights, it hadn't been as much of an issue, but he was certainly grateful for the delay now. It allowed him time to tactfully disengage if he was speaking to someone, and get to some out-of-the-way place where he could ride out the worst of it, and jot down anything he managed to learn in relative privacy.

Speaking of which... Harry reached for his notebook, and wrote down the date, time, and what he could perceive of Voldemort's emotional state as he felt the link snap taut and begin to hum with energy. He had briefly considered writing directly on one of Dumbledore's charmed papers to save time, but quickly discarded the idea. His notes were usually too rambling and disjointed to be understood by anyone besides himself. He'd just waste a piece of the enchanted parchment, and end up recopying it anyway.

Pushing thoughts of parchment out of his head, the boy refocused on Voldemort. The dark wizard was practically licking his chops in anticipation as he spoke to someone. Harry was aware of the voices, but the words were still indistinct.

Voldemort pleased could be worse than Voldemort angry, so the boy stilled, closing his eyes and frowning in concentration as he tried desperately to "hear" or whatever it was he did. He could make out

the words now, but they faded in and out. It was like listening to a radio station that wasn't tuned in properly.

"Time...Wormtail. Sev--sss...activ...portkey," Voldemort was saying. A second later, Harry made out part of Peter's stuttering affirmative. Ah. Snape must have finished his memory potion, then. No wonder Voldemort was so excited. If all went well, he'd soon have whatever information he'd been waiting for, Harry realized, feeling his pulse quicken slightly. He rested his elbows on the desk, and propped his head on clenched fists, willing himself to be able to hear.

"Shall I prepare the drawing room for Snape's arrival?"

Harry couldn't hold back a small gasp of shock. That was the clearest his connection had ever been. It was like Pettigrew was in the room with him. The teen sat still for a time, thinking...feeling.

Strangely he found himself recalling Hermione, and the way she coached Ron and himself when they were stuck on an assignment. Hermione sometimes just gave them the answers, but those treasured occasions were rare. It was far more common for her to ask a series of rapid-fire questions, designed to get their brains back on track. What's happening? he wondered frantically. What's different this time? Is it a fluke? Am I controlling it? Can I do it again?

Voldemort wasn't answering immediately, so Harry took advantage of the few seconds he had to assess himself. He was doing something, that much was clear. He had broken into a light sweat, and exhaustion was settling on him like a lead cape. Before, he'd been tired, and had been considering going to bed early. Now all he felt capable of managing was leaning forward and laying his head down on the desk. Getting up was not an option. His scar, which had only been slightly painful a few minutes ago was burning much more intensely. Come to think of it, Harry realized with the small part of his brain that was still capable of logic, it always seemed to hurt the most when the connection was clearest.

Was that a clue, then? It was so hard to think! Generally it only...it only hurt like that when Voldemort was in a screaming, frothing rage,

or else nearby. Groggily, Harry tried to follow that line of reasoning, knowing instinctively that he was very close to a breakthrough.

Or a breakdown.

Harry snorted in spite of his discomfort, and forced himself back on track. In other words, it only hurt like this when the bond was functioning at maximum efficiency...

Max...? Wait. Yes! Harry's eyes flew open when he finally realized what he must be doing. Somehow, he had increased the flow of...what? Magic? Energy? Whatever. He was making the bond stronger, or else siphoning energy off Voldemort and drawing it down their link and into himself.

Abruptly, Harry recalled something Dumbledore had told him last term. He'd been in the headmaster's office after having the dream in Divination that had provided the fodder for Rita Skeeter's "Disturbed and Dangerous" article. He had asked Professor Dumbledore if he knew why his scar was hurting. Dumbledore's reply seemed to re-enforce his own suspicions.

* It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred.

It made a twisted sort of sense, actually. In the past, Harry hadn't ever tried to reach out when the link became active. It was far more natural to fight and resist, and try to block or dislodge the intruder, especially when it felt like his head was going to split in two.

In the past, he'd had to wait until the dark wizard was expending enough energy to fully fuel the bond himself!

Speaking of whom...Lord Voldemort was finally responding to Peter's timid requests for instructions. Harry scribbled a few lines in his notepad, then turned his attention to what the dark wizard was saying.

"Severus is not coming here. We will be meeting him at an alternate location," Voldemort said dismissively. "Do try to relax, Wormtail. His

portkey is not taking the most direct route to its destination. We have some time yet."

Harry gulped, and felt an unaccustomed twinge of sympathy for the snarky potions professor. For whatever reason, it was clear Snape wasn't fond of portkey travel. It was also clear that Voldemort knew this, and was prolonging the trip, just because he could.

Hold on. 'We have time? Try to relax??' Who is this and what's he done with Lord Voldemort? Harry was just thinking that his enemy's kindness towards Pettigrew seemed wildly out of character, when Voldemort spoke again.

"The memory potion won't be as effective if you're tense," he commented. There was a pause, during which Harry perceived that the dark lord bent until he was practically nose-to-nose with the shorter man, before growling warningly, "And you know how much I detest delays."

Ah. Well I guess that explains that, Harry thought fuzzily, grimacing as his scar gave a particularly nasty throb. His head felt impossibly heavy, and he found he could barely keep his eyes open. Surely it couldn't hurt to rest just for a second, he thought wearily, as he folded his arms on his desktop and laid his head on them. He'd rest his eyes just for a second, then see if he could figure out how he managed to hear so clearly...

"So what's this about Harry having a wicked right hook?" Arabella asked mischievously, as she and her guests slowly ate their Treacle Pudding.

Sirius and Remus exchanged an ironic look, and chuckled amongst themselves, before Sirius began telling the story of how Harry and Hermione and gone after Ron Weasley when Sirius had dragged him down the passageway under the Whomping Willow.

"I have to admit I was surprised he attacked me like that," Sirius said thoughtfully, then grimaced. "I, you might say, reacted poorly."

"That's a little harsh, isn't it Paddy? Just because you nearly hexed his nose off, then tried to strangle him..."

Black glared at Lupin, his eyes clearly stating 'see-if-I-ever-tell-you-anything-again.' "Look, I wasn't thinking clearly just then. Fortunately, Harry's friends, Ron and Hermione intervened before any real harm was done." Arabella sat dumbstruck, while the Marauder continued, telling of the tussle that followed.

"I had a few bad minutes when Harry was standing over me with his wand," Sirius admitted. "I honestly thought he was angry enough to kill me...or try to at any rate. Luckily, the professor here, didn't include the Killing Curse as part of his Third Year curriculum. And anyway, in the end he couldn't do it. About that time is when the calvery showed up," he grinned, indicating Lupin again.

Taking his cue, Remus picked up the tale.

By the time they finished Arabella's eyes were round, and her mouth was hanging slightly open. "He mastered the Patronus Charm at thirteen?" she asked weakly, "and it was the shape of his father's Animagus form?"

"Yes," Remus said speculatively, rubbing his chin. "He was an exceptional student, in my class at least. Snape usually had something uncomplimentary to say about him at staff meetings, but no one else ever seemed to have trouble with him."

Sirius snorted and rolled his eyes. "No surprises there, Moony," he said, referring to the potions professor.

Remus shrugged. "No, that wasn't unexpected," he agreed, "Harry being James' son and all, but sometimes..." he trailed off thoughtfully. "Sometimes he didn't make any sense."

"Harry or Severus?" Arabella grinned.

"Harry. I don't think even Albus understands Snape," Lupin said, rolling his eyes and returning her smile. "For example, Harry learned the Patronus Charm, very advanced magic, in his third year. He threw

off the Imperius Curse in DADA class before Christmas, and again just two weeks ago. That's almost unheard of. All you have to do is talk to the kid for five minutes, and you know he's smart. I daresay he has above average if not exceptional magical talent, and he's the best damn flier I've ever seen."

"So?" Sirius prompted, making impatient 'and-your-point-would-be' gestures.

"So how come Flitwick mentioned that he initially had trouble with the Summoning Charm when we were talking about the First Task yesterday? Compared to the others, that's kid stuff. Harry should have been able to do that without breaking a sweat."

"He was having a hard time then," Sirius said, removing a cat from his lap while recalling Harry's letter that detailed his actions during the First Task. He was afraid of being toasted alive by an overgrown lizard, and Ron was still being a git."

"Okay, that might be a bad example," Remus conceded. "But that isn't an isolated incident. Harry's school record is full of inconsistencies like that. Sometimes things stop him dead in his tracks, like he has a mental block or something. The thing is, a lot of them are relatively simple--things I would think he could do even if he was distracted, or his heart wasn't in it."

"That's a tough call to make, Remus," Sirius challenged, unconvinced. "Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Harry may just have trouble with a few things you find easy."

"Maybe," the werewolf said, not sounding completely convinced. "But I'd still like to have a little chat with him when we get him back."

"I think we'll all be queuing up for that privilege," Black said grimly, looking none too pleased. He dislodged another cat. "Arabella, can't you do something with these blasted felines?"

"Mrs. Figg's lips twitched in amusement. "I'm afraid not, Sirius. They like you, for some unknown reason."

The ex-convict growled in a very dog-like fashion before abruptly transforming, and scattering about a half dozen cats by barking loudly.

Remus and Belle stared for a few seconds, each not believing that Black had just done what he did, then Remus broke into peals of helpless laughter while Arabella blustered indignantly. Padfoot, the bearlike black dog, now sat on the couch where Sirius had been, his tongue lolling out in a canine grin.

"Sirius, really!" Mrs. Figg scolded, peeking into the kitchen, where most of the cats had fled. "Did you have to terrorize the poor things?" Expecting Sirius to have changed back to his human form, she was slightly surprised when she turned and found Black still in his dog form. "Sirius?" she questioned hesitantly. The dog's entire stance had changed. His mouth was closed, his ears were pricked up, and his posture tense and alert.

Remus, likewise, noticed Padfoot's sudden change in demeanor. Sobering, he put a hand on the large dog's shoulder. "Paddy?" he queried, unconsciously sniffing the air. Padfoot's scent was clearest, of course. Moony could almost taste his sudden agitation. Beyond that, he wasn't sure what the problem was. The predominant smells in Mrs. Figg's house were cabbage and cats.

Without warning, Padfoot suddenly jumped off the couch and bounded towards the front door. Arabella and Lupin watched as he sniffed the doorknob, then dropped his head to the floor, and sniffed his way from the entryway, to the kitchen, and back to the living room. Stopping a moment he transformed back. "Harry was here...recently," he snapped curtly, before transforming back, and bounding down the hall.

Remus and Arabella glanced at each other in consternation. "When, Sirius?" Mrs. Figg demanded as Black traced Harry's path back up the hall from the bathroom to the kitchen, and back into the living room. The Animagus ignored her, intent upon his task. He stopped in front of a small table, and pawed at something beneath it. He growled in frustration, then stopped short and shook his head. Shifting easily back into his human form, he groped under the table and retrieved

the note Harry had left for Arabella.

"Here," he said, thrusting the envelope into her hands. "The cats must have knocked it off."

Arabella spared a quick glance at the front of the envelope before ripping it open and removing the note. Remus and Sirius moved so that they could read over her shoulders.

Dear Mrs. Figg,

I don't suppose you were expecting to hear from me. Sorry to have missed you. I popped 'round unannounced when I found out my relatives put their house up for sale.

You're probably wondering what I was doing in here, you being away and all. I can't exactly explain it. The door seemed to know me, and let me in, if that makes any sense.

This sounds really stupid, but the main reason I'm writing, is there's a box in your living room with my name on it, that...well, it wants to come with me. I tried to refuse, but it just won't take no for an answer. I won't open it for a while just in case I made a mistake. If there's a problem, please owl me, and I'll see about getting it back to you.

Yours Sincerely,

Harry Potter

The trio was still for some moments before Sirius finally spoke. "You cast recognition charms on the box and the door?"

Arabella nodded. "Yes. He wouldn't remember. He wasn't even eighteen months old when I placed them. Can you tell how long it's been?"

"Couple of weeks, give or take a day or two," Sirius replied with a shrug. He raked his fingers through his hair, then opened the door.

Changing back into Padfoot, he followed Harry's scent to the street where it vanished.

While he was outside, Remus surreptitiously retrieved the forgotten envelope, and sniffed it. It smelled largely of cats, of course, and Padfoot, and Sirius, and Arabella since they had most recently touched it...but under everything else was the faint, tantalizing scent that Snuffles had identified as Harry's. Remus sniffed again, frowning. Harry's scent was not exactly as he remembered it, but that was to be expected. He knew from his own time at Hogwarts that peoples' scents changed subtly as they grew and matured. Now that he knew what he was looking for, and had an approximate idea where the boy had been, he could make out faint traces of Harry's scent in Arabella's house as well, and...

Remus froze. Was that Harry he had picked up at the Leaky Cauldron? He sniffed the envelope again, considering carefully. It was close. Damn close. But when would Harry have had a chance to visit the wizard pub? If his relatives were as magic-phobic as the others said, they probably wouldn't go near the place.

"What is it Remus," Mrs. Figg asked, watching him closely.

Remus turned to face her, still clearly trying to work something out. "You know that scent I picked up at the Leaky Cauldron?"

"Yes?"

"I think it was Harry."

"What about Harry?" Remus jumped at the sound of Sirius' voice. He'd been so intent on the envelope, he hadn't noticed when Black had re-entered, and closed the door behind him.

"I caught a scent I couldn't place immediately at the Leaky Cauldron when we picked up the food." Remus indicated the envelope. "I'm not 100% certain, but I think it might have been Harry."

"I suppose its too much to hope that you could determine the scent's age?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, we'll just let Padfoot have a go," Sirius stated, striding purposefully towards the fireplace.

"Wait, Sirius. Harry could have visited the Leaky Cauldron on his way out of town for all we know, and his name wasn't on the guest register. I looked," Arabella said, catching his arm.

"What did you learn outside?" Remus asked, neatly diverting his friend's attention.

Black frowned, glancing toward the door. "I followed the path he took down to the street, then his trail just vanishes. The route he took over here from Privet Drive was spotty, and hard to follow. The scent kept dropping out and re-appearing. How's the weather been?"

"The estate agent I spoke with mentioned that Little Whinging has gotten a lot of rain recently," Arabella supplied, surprised at the sudden shift in topic. "Evidently it interfered with her showings."

Padfoot and Moony both nodded sagely. That explained quite a bit. "Rainy weather can louse up a trail," Remus supplied kindly when Belle looked confused. "If Harry surprised by a sudden cloudburst, or hurrying for whatever reason, he could have splashed through a few puddles on his way over."

"I don't like the way his scent just stops there at the street, though," Sirius said, looking perturbed. "I should have been able to pick up traces of his scent even if he got into a car."

"That's a stretch, isn't it Paddy? Under normal circumstances, yes, but with the rain?"

"I said I should have been able to pick up traces. I didn't necessarily say I could have followed it," Sirius snapped, pacing in front of the fireplace. "It's like he vanished, or disappeared!" He stopped with a suspicious look on his face. "He can't disappearate yet, can he?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Wait, I've got it!" Arabella exclaimed. "We were just talking about it at Hogwarts. The Knight Bus! Maybe he was coming by to say goodbye. Maybe he took the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley for a last look 'round!"

"Or maybe he didn't go with his relatives," Black said grimly. "But if that's true why hasn't he contacted anyone?" He shook his head impatiently. "It doesn't make sense!"

Mrs. Figg's living room was silent for a time, as its occupants tried to figure out what to do. Finally Remus spoke up. "Look, we don't have enough solid evidence to prove our case either way. Albus is handling the Australia scenario. Let's contact Arthur in the morning, and work the other possibility." He shrugged. "If we're right, we'll already be working on it. If we're wrong, it won't hurt anything. We can start at King's Cross. See if we can trace his movements. Check the destination logs on the Knight Bus. I mean, he's Harry Potter for crying out loud! Someone should have noticed him!"

Arabella Figg nodded her assent, then walked toward the door. "That sounds feasible, Remus. Meanwhile, I should go put those charms Albus wanted on the Dursley's old home. Wouldn't want the old place to sell, now would we?"

Harry hadn't really intended to nod off. He'd just wanted to lay his head down and close his eyes for a moment. Maintaining the bond was harder than he thought, and his scar was protesting his efforts by burning hatefully.

Actually, when he'd laid his head on his arms, the pressure against his brow had helped somewhat. Harry had considered trying to sooth the mark by holding his charmed glass of milk against it, but he wasn't sure he could keep a firm grip on the container.

It was an odd feeling, really. Harry had thought that falling asleep would disrupt his snooping on Wormtail and Voldemort, but that didn't

turn out to be the case. The voices he'd been listening to faded into silence, but now his unconscious mind was providing images.

The same feeling of traveling he had experienced in other dreams was back. Before, he had dreamed he was riding on an enormous eagle owl, but this time he soared through the sky toward the now familiar ivy-covered house on the hill on the back of a rather enlarged version of Fawkes the Phoenix. That's where Voldemort is! Harry suddenly realized, as they circled the house. That must be his headquarters!

Yes, fledgling, that is the Serpent's Lair. We shall not be staying long, a voice that could only belong to the scarlet and gold firebird stated.

Before Harry could gather his wits to respond, Fawkes dove gracefully toward the house. Ghost-like, they slipped through a wall, and observed, hovering near the ceiling, while Voldemort and Wormtail prepared to leave. The other wizards weren't doing anything out of the ordinary, so Harry glanced around, looking for some clue as to his location. He stopped only when his quarry portkeyed away with a faint pop.

Blinking, Harry stared at the place where the pair had been. Hey! he thought irrationally. Come back! How am I supposed to spy on you if you leave like this! Grinding his insubstantial teeth in frustration, Harry shifted on Fawkes' back, while the phoenix drifted down towards the floor. This had never happened before. Very strange. Well, I guess I could poke around a bit, since I'm here...

You could, fledgling, but to what purpose? Observing the dark one is far more important at this juncture, do you not agree?

"Well, yeah, but I don't know where he's gone," Harry said shrugging helplessly. "Usually the dream takes me to where he is, and I stay there until something happens to wake me up."

I will be assisting you with the second part of your journey, fledgling, Fawkes informed the stunned wizard on his back, flapping his mighty wings, and exiting the way he'd come in.

Harry found he could do little besides cling to the firebird's back, as Fawkes wheeled and headed roughly southeast. "Erm, excuse me, but where are we going?" he finally ventured, noticing that the countryside was flashing by entirely too quickly for him to follow.

I am taking you to your next transportation source, Fawkes replied, sounding amused. And here it is.

Frowning, Harry peered down and saw what appeared to be a visible wind current, or jet stream. He didn't like the look of it. Not at all. Swallowing nervously, he ventured, "Fawkes, what exactly is that thing?"

He felt, rather than heard the phoenix' compassionate sigh. It is a portkey trail, fledgling. It will take you to your final destination.

Harry felt himself pale. "Portkey?" he croaked, unconsciously tightening his grip on the firebird.

I am sorry, but this is where we must part, fledgling.

"Wait!" Harry said, eyeing the shimmering trail beneath him mistrustfully. "There must be another way!" he shouted frantically. "Please, Fawkes! No!"

Until next time, Harry Potter, the phoenix said sadly, before disappearing in a burst of flame.

Too terrified to even shout, Harry found himself free falling as the last remains of Fawkes' conflagration spent themselves in mid air. Wake up! he ordered himself, as the portkey trail rushed up to meet him. WAKE UP!

His body was obviously intent on ignoring any such suggestion, and slept on back at the Leaky Cauldron, because sooner than he would have liked, he dropped feet first into the magic below him. At first he thought he might fall completely through it, and continue on towards the ground, but the second he touched it, he was caught by the current and swept away in a rush of color and sound. As he was dragged helplessly forward toward Who-Knows-Where, Harry

clenched his teeth determinedly to stop himself from screaming or perhaps throwing up. He wasn't usually prone to motion sickness, but this rough, tumbling, head-over-heels ride was enough to test the strongest stomach. It was even worse than traveling by Floo Powder.

Dimly, he became aware that he was not alone. Occasionally, when he was facing in the right direction, and his eyes were open and not watering too badly, he could make out a figure several meters ahead of him. He was too far away to make out the identity of his mysterious companion, but judging by the billowing robes the figure was wearing, Harry was prepared to bet he was trailing after Professor Snape.

Okay, this is officially a nightmare, Harry thought, as he flailed around trying to right himself, and keep his mind off his very queasy stomach. He already knew Snape was portkeying by some roundabout route to some unknown destination. It was just Sod's Law that he, Harry, would be "invited" along for the ride.

The trip continued on in a similar fashion for several minutes, before ending with shocking suddenness. One minute, Harry was engulfed in the flowing, buffeting, maelstrom that was the portkey's wake, and the next...nothing. Harry spun around a few more times before finally coming to a stop, and cautiously opening his eyes.

With a start he realized he was floating a few meters above the ground in inky darkness. The stars and moon above his head provided a little light, but where ever he was, it was remote. The only sign of human habitation was a small, run-down cottage with a light in the window. Hopefully, that was where the party was.

Right, then, Harry thought, gathering his nerve, and preparing to walk over to the cottage. Let's see what Lord Voldemort is up to, shall we?

It took a few seconds for him to realize he was getting exactly nowhere. Evidently, when one happens to be floating, walking ceases to be an effective method of locomotion.

Harry raised an eyebrow at this new development, then shook his head impatiently. He didn't have time for this! Snape and Voldemort were probably already interrogating Pettigrew. He raised his hand,

intending to rake it through his hair, but stopped, distracted, when he noticed the rather, erm, transparent condition of the limb. This had never happened before! Well, he didn't think it had at any rate.

Harry frowned as he peered through the back of his hand. He'd had the sensation of flying and traveling to Voldemort's location in the past, but this time was different. For one thing, he felt awake. It was like being in two places at once. He was aware of his current surroundings of course, but at the same time, he was cognizant of his body which was still sleeping back in London.

Harry rubbed his temples, pleased that he could still do so, and decided this was beyond weird.

It was possible, of course, that he was only dreaming, and consequently dealing with details conjured by his own twisted imagination. Relieved that there seemed to be a rational explanation, Harry latched onto that thought. He was dreaming. It was obvious, really. He'd only just seen Fawkes, and Fawkes had presented him with a portkey as well, come to think of it. As for the trail, someone--Hermione? Mr. Weasley perhaps?--had once told him about the mechanics of portkeys. The wind and flashing colors one experienced while in transit were just an effect of being pulled forward at great speed by the magical device.

The only thing the teen couldn't dismiss out of hand was the eerie feeling of being somehow away from his body. After studying the sensation for a few seconds, Harry reckoned that this was probably similar to what muggle astronauts experienced when they went on space walks. He was floating, apparently weightless, and there seemed to be something, rather like a safety line, anchoring him to his physical form.

Twisting around to look over his shoulder, Harry could just barely make out a faint, silvery link that seemed to originate in the small of his back, and extend a ways behind him before vanishing into the night.

Was this mysterious tether what was keeping him from moving? Harry wasn't sure, but he didn't think so. Actually, he couldn't shake

the infuriating feeling that this was something he should recognize. Something important he should know. Was it something he'd read? Something that was mentioned in class?

Heaving a heavy sigh, Harry finally decided to worry about it later. Maybe, if he remembered when he woke up, he could look it up. Right now he had more pressing problems--like trying to figure out how he was supposed to move now that he was transparent, floating, and on some kind of weird magical leash.

Raking his hand through his messy black hair, the boy considered his predicament. If walking didn't work, perhaps...swimming? Jumping? Crawling? Harry tried them all with no success, and felt his frustration mount. The cottage seemed to mock him with its proximity. If this was occurring under normal circumstances, and he had both feet firmly on the ground, he could have crossed the short distance in seconds.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" he finally exploded. "I just want to go over there!"

So he did.

Blinking in surprise, and feeling a little disoriented, Harry found he had moved. Boy had he moved!

He was now hovering beside the cottage window, with his face very close to the panes. Distractedly, he wondered if this was what apparating felt like. One arm, with which he had been pointing at his desired destination, was now shoved through the glass. Whoa! Harry thought, bending his arm so that his hand was visible, and wriggling his fingers. He was pleased to note that there wasn't any visible damage to the window, or his skin. In fact, it reminded him of pushing through the enchanted barrier at Platform 9¾.

Only this time he was transparent and the wall was solid.

At least he could see inside now. Voldemort was sitting in an armchair, and Snape was kneeling at his feet. It took a second for the boy to spot Pettigrew. He was huddled in a corner off to the side. Trying not to be noticed, Harry thought, correctly interpreting Peter's

behavior. Fleetingly, he wondered if he had ever looked that frightened and pathetic when he'd still lived with the Dursleys. At least that bad, probably worse, he decided, wrinkling his nose.

Huffing impatiently, Harry jerked his mind away from Privet Drive, and refocused on his potions professor. Snape's voice was an indistinct murmur, as was Voldemort's. His scar was still burning fiercely, but the link didn't seem to be active at the moment. Naturally. Harry grumbled sulkily, rolling his eyes. The one time he wanted the blasted thing to work...

He'd just have to get closer, then. All he had to do was figure out how he'd done it just now.

Actually, Harry realized with a start, he hadn't done anything. He'd been trying to figure out how to move...nothing he'd tried had worked...he'd been hovering like an overgrown helium balloon...until...until...

Until I lost my temper. Harry raised an eyebrow, reconsidering. No, until I concentrated on the cottage and wished to be there. Was that all there was to it? Surely not. It seemed too simple.

Well, he'd never know unless he tried. Shrugging, Harry focused on the wall, and hesitantly concentrated on moving forward. Obliging, he began to drift through the wall, but at an annoyingly slow rate of speed. Bloody hell! Harry thought, as he watched Snape summon and transfigure some pieces of firewood. He'd seen quicker garden slugs. Come on! he thought more insistently. Faster!

Surprisingly, it worked. The minute his head was through the wall, Harry could hear their conversation once more. "Drink this," Snape said, addressing a clearly reluctant Peter Pettigrew, his words abrupt and terse. Harry rolled his eyes again. Nice, he thought with a sarcastic snort. Obviously the Hogwarts Potions Master didn't believe in wasting time with pleasantries or reassurances.

Actually, Harry realized, he wasn't really at the best vantage point. Before, when he'd had dreams, or visions, or whatever featuring Voldemort, he'd just had to take what he got. In one such dream, he'd

never even seen the dark wizard at all, only heard him as he spoke. Now, he seemed to be able to move around, however haphazardly. It was weird, though. He seemed to have to be angry to move with any speed. Surely that wasn't right!

Deciding to try again, he focused on where he wanted to be, and set off. This time things went more smoothly. Instead of creeping slowly forward, or materializing with jarring suddenness at some distant location, he was drifting along at approximately his normal walking pace, in a manner reminiscent of Sir Nicholas de Minsy-Porpington, and the other ghosts at Hogwarts. So he didn't necessarily have to be angry then, just...confident. The thought to move had to be a self-assured order, not a hesitant plea.

Interesting, Harry thought, filing that bit of information away for future reference as he glided over to where he could see better, and settled in to observe.

* Quote from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire by J.K. Rowling

Chapter 17 - It's All In The Details

Sunday, July 16, 1995

Tom made a discontented noise, when he felt long, feline whiskers tickling his face. The whiskers were soon joined by an insistent paw tapping on his cheek, and a wet little nose investigating his ear. When he started showing signs of life, his ear immediately reverberated with a rumbling purr.

"Patches!" he groaned unhappily, opening one eye a crack, then closing it again. Judging by the faint light filtering through the windows, it was a good hour or so before he had to get up. "What do you mean, waking me up at this hour?", he grouched, shooing the cat away with a clumsy wave of his hand. Unperturbed, Patches merely stepped down, and settled comfortably in his lap, kneading his leg and purring contentedly.

Tom's mouth lifted in a sleepy half smile as he absently stroked her coat. Dimly, his awakening brain began to process several details. He was holding his wand loosely in the hand that wasn't petting Patches, he was still fully dressed, all the way down to his shoes, and he sitting in what felt like his favorite overstuffed chair.

After deciding that he must have fallen asleep in the living room again, Tom yawned sleepily and shifted slightly in the chair. It was early yet. He could doze a little longer before getting up to face the day. He had very nearly dropped off again, when a small noise beside him made him jump in surprise.

Tom snapped his eyes open and reflexively grasped his wand. Still not quite awake, he looked warily around, wondering if there was an intruder. No one was supposed to be in his private rooms without an invitation, after all. When his eyes fell on the bed beside him, he relaxed almost immediately. Oh. Not to worry. It was just Harry, shifting in his sleep.

Tom put a hand over his heart and blew out a relieved breath as Harry mumbled something, then was quiet once more. That was close! the innkeeper thought gratefully, settling comfortably back into

his chair with a yawn. He had very nearly shouted in alarm when he'd heard the boy stir. Oh, my, yes. That would have awakened him for sure, and that would never do. Poor lad needed his rest, especially after that nasty spell he'd had last night.

Wait... Harry?! Last night??! Suddenly wide awake, Tom realized he was in his old room above the kitchen as events came back in a rush. After everything had settled down, he'd decided to sit with Harry for a little while to make sure he was all right. He must have nodded off!

Remembering something else, Tom jumped to his feet, dislodging Patches in the process. Ignoring the cat's indignant yowl, he sought out the second tracking charm he'd cast last night. This one was displayed on the inside of Harry's door.

Sparky:

Location: Leaky Cauldron (loft suite)

Status: Normal

Normal. Good. Tom felt the knot of tension in his chest ease somewhat, then frowned suspiciously. "Temporis Spatium!*" he said softly, pointing his wand at the status line. He should have been awakened last night if anything was wrong, but it never hurt to make sure. He broke into a relieved grin when he viewed the results of the Duration Query. Harry's status hadn't changed again during the night.

Briefly, he wished he knew a more detailed spell. The person and location lines were fine, but the status...the status was a bit vague. After last night he found himself wanting input more helpful and informative than Normal, Warning, and Danger. Tracking charms weren't something he dealt with a lot, and they were generally temporary. He certainly hadn't thought the charm he'd cast would be a long-term thing, but now he was seriously considering keeping it active until Harry was safely back at Hogwarts.

Frustrated and unsure what to do, Tom settled for lighting the room just a bit and carefully studying the youth in front of him. Actually, he thought, reaching down, and searching Potter's forehead for signs of

fever, Harry's looking a lot better now. The boy was warm, but not overly so, and was sleeping peacefully which pleased Tom a great deal. Satisfied, he straightened up, and stretched his stiff back.

Sighing, Tom rubbed his temples, worry and indecision prodding him. After running the Leaky Cauldron all these years, he had thought there wasn't a whole lot he hadn't seen or heard of. People tended to open up to bartenders, especially after they'd had a few. If he had any desire to do so, he could write the king of all scandal sheets.

He never would, of course. Even if he didn't find the idea repulsive, Tom knew he'd have to find another line of work if he ever abused his customers' trust in such a manner.

Still, as much as he hated to admit it, Harry had scared the hell out of him. He'd made a career out of watching and interacting with people. He prided himself on being able to handle any situation, but last night he'd been at a loss. He still was.

What happened? Tom wondered shakily, closing his eyes and thinking back. Except for those little muggleborn witches dropping by, the previous evening had been largely unremarkable. As a matter of fact, he hadn't even had a hint that something was amiss until after "Last Call."

After escorting the last few customers out, he had locked up, and begun tidying up for the night. There hadn't been a lot to do, really, just wipe down the bar, and take the last few mugs, glasses, and bottles into the kitchen. Ignoring the tub that Harry generally used for that purpose, Tom had used a Summoning Charm to gather the glassware together, then cast a Levitation Charm on the whole lot. As he directed them through the door and into the sink, he remembered thinking that he should cancel the tracking spell he'd cast on the Boy-Who-Lived, before he forgot. After setting the load of dishes in the sink, he'd raised his wand, intending to do just that, but a glance at the status line had made him freeze in his tracks.

Warning.

Taken completely by surprise, Tom had simply stared for a second. His first notion was that Harry must have gone again out without him noticing, but when he raised his eyes to the location line, it still read Leaky Cauldron (loft suite).

Frightened, Tom had turned, and hurried up the back steps. When Harry hadn't responded to his knocks and calls, he had become half convinced that the boy had been attacked. Steeling himself for the worst, Tom had readied himself, then entered Harry's room, wand drawn.

Initially, he hadn't been able to determine what was wrong. Harry wasn't directly facing him, but judging by his appearance, he was obviously in for the night. Potter had changed into the soft knit t-shirt and sweat pants that he'd taken to sleeping in, his headband was missing, and his glasses were perched on the top of his head. The boy was seated at the desk, and by all indications, he'd nodded off while working on a letter or an assignment.

Relieved, Tom had wondered if the tracking charm was faulty, or else more sensitive than he had first thought. The only thing Harry seemed to be in danger of, was waking up with a very stiff neck and back.

He had moved to the desk, and called to the boy, thinking he would at least get him to move to the bed, but Harry had not stirred.

Tom had found this very peculiar. He'd learned a few things about the Boy-Who-Lived since the beginning of summer, and one thing he'd become aware of early on, was Harry Potter was a rather light sleeper. Trying again, he had called louder, and reached out to shake the boy's shoulder.

He still hadn't gotten a response, but Tom had noticed Harry's shirt was damp with perspiration.

Frowning, Tom had stepped back a second, and turned his attention to the condition of the suite. Odd. The room was at a comfortable temperature, and Harry wasn't overdressed. He had wondered about this for a few seconds, then the obvious answer had occurred to him.

Potter must be ill. That would go a long way toward explaining his unusually deep sleep.

It was too bad, really, Tom had thought while he removed the boy's glasses, and turned down the bed with a wave of his wand. "Wingardium Leviosa!" he commanded, pointing his wand at the unconscious teenager.

As he'd carefully guided Harry's unresponsive form from the desk to the bed, Tom had reflected that, although unfortunate, this wasn't all that surprising. When Harry had shown up that first night, wet, pale, flushed, and sneezing, Tom had been certain that the boy was coming down with a severe cold. He'd actually been rather shocked by Harry's condition when he went into his room the following afternoon.

Certain the boy would be needing them, he'd rummaged through the Leaky Cauldron's medicine cabinet before going up. Armed with a fever reducer and some Pepper-Up Potion, he'd headed for Room 11, assuming he would have a sick teen on his hands for a few days.

Astonishingly, that hadn't been the case.

Potter had still looked a bit peaky, and was very stressed and apprehensive, but the all the other signs of illness had been gone. He was more alert, he no longer appeared feverish, and he'd stopped sneezing.

That wasn't the only time, either, now that he thought about it. Something similar had happened when Harry had irritated his skin so, trying to finish all the items on the list Tom had given him. Appalled by what had happened, Tom had gone to his own rooms during a lull between lunch and dinner, and dug out his jar of soothing hand balm. It had been waiting in the kitchen when Harry reported for work, but it hadn't been necessary. In fact...

Tom raised his eyebrows speculatively, and gently brushed Harry's black hair back, exposing his forehead, and his lightning bolt scar. Last night the mark had been red and irritated, like Harry had only recently been injured. Tom had also felt a tingle of energy when he'd

touched it, almost like static electricity. Now it was looking and behaving like it usually did. Strange.

Deciding it was probably safe to leave Harry alone, provided he kept an eye on the tracking charm in the kitchen, Tom started to cast a Shrinking Spell on his chair, meaning to pocket it, and take it back to his own rooms, then he noticed Harry's desk chair was missing. Oh, yes. He'd transfigured the desk chair into something a bit more comfortable.

I really do need my morning tea, Tom thought sheepishly, undoing his spell, and replacing the chair at the desk, before creeping softly toward the door. On his way out, he whispered Finite Incantatem, canceling the copy of Harry's status before gently shutting the door behind him. Seeming to sense where he was going, Patches let herself out through the cat flap, and was down the stairs in a flash.

As he busied himself in the kitchen, putting on the kettle, and setting out Patches' feeding dish, Tom returned to his musings. He'd gotten Harry into bed without much fuss. The boy was pale, and still sweating a little, so Tom had fetched a wet washcloth, intending to bathe his face and arms, and try to make him a bit more comfortable. It had been then when he'd become aware of the strange energy that seemed to emanate from Harry's scar, and the condition of the mark itself. When he'd touched the boy's skin with the cloth, the hair on his arm had literally stood on end.

That had been nothing compared to what happened next, however.

Without warning, Harry had let out a strangled cry and his hands had flown to his forehead. Shuddering convulsively, he had rolled onto his side, and curled up defensively. The tendons in his arms and neck had stuck out like taut wires, and his respiration had become quick and shallow.

"Harry!" Tom had shouted, alternating between shaking the boy, and trying to pry his hands away from his head. "Harry, wake up!" he pleaded, but the youth showed no signs of hearing him. His eyes and jaws were clamped tightly shut, but little sounds of distress came out with every breath.

It had seemed to go on forever, although realistically Tom reckoned it had probably only been two or three minutes. Then as quickly as it had begun, it was over. Harry slowly stopped shaking and relaxed, panting and sweating like he'd just run a race. He still didn't respond to Tom's calls, but at least he didn't seem to be hurting anymore. Tom took that as a good sign. He retrieved the washcloth he'd dropped earlier, and began to gently cool the boy's feverish skin, talking to him all the while.

Finally he got a response. Harry clenched his fists and gasped, then his green eyes flew open and he woke with a start. "Whoa, whoa, easy there," Tom admonished, when Harry sat bolt upright, then wobbled dizzily at the sudden movement. He put his hands on the boy's shoulders to steady him. "Take it slow."

"Can't," Harry had croaked, shaking his head stubbornly, and wiping at his watering eyes. "Dreamt about HIM. Have t'write it down--" he began, then broke off with a miserable-sounding groan, and put one hand over his mouth as though nauseated. "Steady lad," Tom had said, summoning Harry's milk glass and transfiguring it into a basin--just in case--as Harry closed his eyes, and concentrated on controlling his stomach.

Fortunately, the boy had prevailed, and Tom's precautions hadn't been necessary. After a minute or so, Harry had opened his eyes, removed his hand and nodded weakly. Tom broke into a relieved grin, and carefully pushed him back down on the bed when he tried to stand again. "Tell me what you want, and I'll fetch it," he instructed. "You just relax."

"Paper...pen," Harry said, slurring his words slightly as he gestured in the general direction of the desk.

Nodding, Tom had fetched Harry's muggle notebook and pen from the desk, then looked on in concern as Harry rolled over onto his stomach, flinching as he did so, and scribbled a few lines. Yawning hugely, the boy laid his head on his arm and mumbled. "Need t'write t'Dumbledore..."

"In the morning," Tom had replied firmly, taking the writing materials, and laying them on the night stand. "Or at least after you've rested a bit." Knowing Harry's stubborn nature, he'd expected if not an argument, then at least a token protest, but Harry had just nodded and closed his eyes. Tom had found his unprotesting acquiescence worrisome--moreso even than his strange seizure had been. He had almost marched downstairs right then and there to Floo for medical help, but on second thought, he had decided to wait until morning. Harry seemed to be in a deep restful sleep now, and he had responded with little murmurs when Tom cast drying and freshening charms, instead of being so terribly unresponsive.

After covering the boy, Tom had retrieved the desk chair, and transfigured it into something a bit more comfortable. Evidently he'd done too good of a job with that. He'd only intended to stay for a little while, just to make sure Harry was all right, and didn't wake again. Instead, he'd fallen asleep himself and stayed all bloody night!

Ah well, no one's perfect, Tom thought, grabbing a cup and moving toward the kettle when began to whistle.

Out of bed, you sleepy-head! Out of bed, you sleepy-head!

Harry Potter groaned and buried his head in his pillow. Was that Aunt Petunia calling?

Out of bed, you sleepy-head! Out of bed, you sleepy-head!

"Coming," he mumbled, still half asleep. Absently he reached up for the pull string that hung down from the cupboard's ceiling light. When his hand encountered empty air, his eyebrows drew together in annoyance. Had Dudley flipped the cord onto the top shelf and out of reach again?

Out of bed, you sleepy-head! Out of bed, you sleepy-head!

Without opening his eyes, Harry murmured another sleepy affirmative, abandoning his search for the pull-string, and feeling around for his glasses instead. He started in surprise when he reached behind his

head, and his questing fingers encountered a smooth oak headboard. Where was the shelf behind his cot? Where were his glasses?

Out of bed, you sleepy-head! Out of bed, you sleepy-head!

Oh, right. He'd been moved to Dudley's second room just before beginning school at Hogwarts. Stupid of him to have forgotten...old habits and all that.

Out of bed, you sleepy-head! Out of bed, you sleepy-head!

Aunt Petunia was certainly repeating herself an awful lot, Harry noted absently, wondering why she hadn't banged on his door yet. As he drifted towards full wakefulness, he realized it wasn't Aunt Petunia addressing him at all. The voice by his bed was far too cheerful and perky. It sounded nothing like her usual strident screech.

Harry opened his eyes, frowning in confusion, then squinted at the clock on his nightstand. Oh, right. He was in the room over the Leaky Cauldron's kitchen. Tom wanted him to come down early, so he'd set the alarm just to be safe. Up to now he hadn't bothered with it since Patches had taken it upon herself to wake him every day. Strange. He'd expected the alarm to be the little chimes that sounded when the clock was trying to get his attention, not this!

Out of bed, you sleepy-head! Out of bed, you sleepy-head!

Amazing. He hadn't thought an alarm existed that was more annoying than that buzzer thing Uncle Vernon had, but this was enough to make an otherwise sane person go 'round the twist.

Out of bed, you sleepy-head! Out of bed, you sleepy-head! Out of bed, you sleepy head!

"All right," he growled, snatching up the clock and battling down a mad urge to chuck the thing across the room when he couldn't immediately find the "Off" switch. "I'm up, I'm up! Shut up already, would you?"

Obediently, the clock silenced when he deactivated the alarm, and began to reset itself. After a few seconds, in addition to the time, the face displayed, "Too Early To Be Up."

Harry rolled his eyes at the timepiece, as he set it back on the nightstand, then sat up looking for his glasses. Strange. They should be right there beside the clock...and how did his notebook get there? Harry raised an eyebrow, puzzling over this. For that matter, how had he gotten here? He certainly didn't remember getting up and coming to bed. In fact, the last thing he remembered, was laying his head down on the desk when he'd been listening in on Voldemort and Wormtail.

Curious, Harry padded over to the desk. Sure enough, there were his glasses, folded neatly on top of his scattered letters and homework assignments. He automatically put them on, then sat down and reached for a piece of Dumbledore's charmed parchment.

He was about halfway through recounting his dream, when he realized he was recalling all the details without the use of his notebook. That was different.

Usually he had to write down dreams right away, because he lost details so quickly upon awakening. Sometimes even with the prompts in his notebook it was hard to remember everything, but for some reason, looking back on the dream he'd had last night was like thinking of something that happened yesterday. If he concentrated a bit, he could remember everything clearly and easily.

Harry felt a shiver go down his spine when he remembered the curious feeling of being awake at the remote cabin, and asleep at the Leaky Cauldron simultaneously. That was beyond bizarre. He wondered if this was worth mentioning to his headmaster. Perhaps he should wait to see if he could identify what was going on first. He just knew this was something he'd heard of before--he just couldn't recall from where!

Sighing, Harry put down his enchanted quill and checked the time again. Drat. He needed to get downstairs, but he really wanted to send this letter now, not later. Shrugging, as he remembered

Dumbledore's request to forward all information, no matter how simple or unimportant, he scribbled a brief description of the rest of the dream and a small bit about his scar burning.

The part about his dream sounded a little nutters, he thought critically as looked it over a few minutes later, but the overall the tone was calm and informative. Deciding it would do, Harry activated the parchment, then gathered some clothes and started getting cleaned up.

Back in the kitchen, Tom was looking over the Leaky Cauldron's stash of healing and medicinal potions. People got sick, after all, and didn't always have their own with them, so he kept a supply of some of the mildest non-prescription potions on hand. He'd gotten the idea as a young man when one of his customers had woken in the night with a raging case of heartburn. It had been so severe, he had woken Tom to see if he had anything that would help. Unfortunately, Tom hadn't had a remedy available, since he didn't suffer from the affliction himself, and the matter hadn't seemed worth a trip to St. Mungo's, so the ailing wizard just had to wait until the little potions shop opened the next morning. Tom had offered to go, and had purchased a small array of common remedies while he was at it.

It had been a sound investment, Tom mused as he studied the bottles, noting the levels of the potions they contained. The goodwill it had earned him had been enormous, and since most witches and wizards added money toward replacement when they settled their accounts, the cost of providing the service was minimal. Hmm. He still had plenty of fever reducer, but he was almost out of Stomach Soothing Solution. Mrs. Nettleby had used quite a bit of it during her stay a couple of weeks ago. Poor dear. Ah well, there were a few doses left. He'd order more later.

Frowning, Tom sipped his tea, and began to organize. So far as he knew, Harry had been planning to stay at the Leaky Cauldron today and do laundry. He'd see how the boy was doing when he woke up, then they could send owls to the shops Sparky was supposed to be working at for the next couple of days. Actually, after what he had seen last night, a check-up at St. Mungo's might be in order. The old

wizard was just considering making a list when a quiet voice spoke behind him.

"Good morning, Tom."

Startled out of his reverie, the wizard whirled around, then blinked a couple of times. "Harry?" he blurted incredulously. He'd figured Harry would be spending the next day or two sick in bed, but there he was, freshly dressed, hair still damp from the shower, and looking none the worse for wear.

He gaped until the boy frowned worriedly at him. "Are you all right, Tom?" Harry asked, studying his elder uncertainly. "Maybe you should sit down," he suggested. "Would you like another cup of tea?"

Still thunderstruck, Tom sat heavily at one of the worktables, and didn't object when Harry collected his cup, and went to refill it. When he glanced at the clock it read, "You're Early." Tom raised an eyebrow at Harry when his young companion returned, and placed two steaming mugs on the table. "What are you doing up at this hour?" he asked, as the boy perched on the chair beside him.

"Er, you said you wanted to talk to me," Potter stated, fiddling nervously with his own teacup.

Oh, yes... Tom thought, remembering as from another lifetime when he'd asked Harry to come down a little early. Merlin! Had it really only been last night?

"If that isn't true, I can go," Harry offered, seeming more than grateful for a chance to escape. He had just started to rise, but the other wizard stopped him.

"No, no, I remember now," he said with a small smile. "Sorry, I was off with the pixies. Breakfast?"

Harry shook his head. He wasn't hungry just yet. "Maybe a little later?"

"Very well." Tom folded his hands on the table and seemed to gather his thoughts. "When I originally asked you to come down, I had a few questions in mind, but after last night I find I have a few more."

Harry started, then paled a bit, as he realized what had happened. The last bit of information he hadn't been able to place upon awakening fell into place. That's right! Tom was there when I woke up from my nightmare! He fetched my notebook! he thought, feeling faintly scandalized. Had Tom gotten him from the desk to the bed as well?

He swallowed nervously and studied the tabletop, wondering if he'd done something strange and unforgivable last night while he'd been dreaming. Did Tom believe him to be a threat now? Where would he go if he couldn't stay at the Leaky Cauldron anymore?

He was so worried about his impending eviction, he nearly jumped out of his skin when Tom leaned forward, and laid a gentle hand on his forearm.

"Are you all right?" Tom asked, frowning worriedly now. "You looked like an owl in daylight for a second there." When Harry nodded, he went on. "You seem to be a lot better this morning, but you appeared to be terribly ill last night, Harry. It might not hurt for you to get checked over by your regular physician, or at least take a couple of days off and rest. You can send owls to the shopkeepers you're supposed to be assisting, they'll be disappointed, but they'll understand."

"Oh, and speaking of owls," Tom said, interrupting himself before Harry could say anything, "I received a letter from your headmaster yesterday. He asked if I'd mind allowing you to occasionally make use of the Leaky Cauldron owls since your own is so distinctive." Tom frowned a bit, and fished the letter out of one of his robe pockets, and squinted at it. "I don't know why he thought it would be an inconvenience, with you staying here and all, I suppose he didn't want to presume anything."

Harry blinked once or twice as he processed what Tom was saying. The other wizard was worried about owls? And his health? This

wasn't what he had been expecting at all. Before he could stop it, a question escaped. "So I can still stay here, then?"

Brought up short, Tom frowned again, this time in confusion. "Why on earth would you think you couldn't?"

Harry shrugged dropped his gaze to the tabletop again. He found his attention momentarily distracted by Tom's hand which was still resting lightly on his forearm. It was an interesting sensation, not at all like when his aunt or uncle roughly grabbed him, or when one of his friends grasped his hand to direct him somewhere or hurry him along. No this was calm and undemanding. Comforting, one might say.

Before he'd started attending Hogwarts, Harry hadn't had a lot of experience with positive touch. He had observed it, of course. Dudley had always been showered with affection by both parents, but Harry had always been fascinated by the small, loving attentions that Aunt Petunia especially, seemed to do without conscious thought. It was the same at the Burrow. Molly Weasley was forever brushing back hair, straightening clothing, and bestowing quick loving touches much to his friend Ron's chagrin. Janet Wright had behaved in a similar fashion with Kitty and Becky just last night, come to think of it.

Since he'd started his magical training, he'd made a lot of progress. He'd become accustomed, for example, to the rough, brotherly jostling of his dorm-mates and the Quidditch team. He'd learned to accept Hermione and Hagrid's tackling, exuberant hugs with good grace, and, most of the time, he could deal with casual contact from his professors and peers. It was those fleeting moments of genuine tenderness that still took him by surprise. He found himself feeling lost and tongue-tied, and unsure what to do.

Finally, unable to bear the suspense, he looked up and met Tom's shrewd gaze. "You're still fretting about that rubbish Rita Skeeter wrote, aren't you," the other wizard said, his tone making it a statement, not a question. "I thought we sorted this out your first day here."

Harry didn't respond aloud, but his cheeks reddened slightly.

Tom tutted disapprovingly. "Child, I've lost count of how many witches and wizards have sat in my pub and cried out tales of woe that featured that woman. Unfortunately she always makes sure her articles have just enough truth in them. The Daily Prophet doesn't usually retract a story unless it's completely wrong. More importantly," he continued, giving Harry's arm a little squeeze before sitting back, and folding his hands on the table, "I've never believed you to be a danger to those around you. If I did, I wouldn't have recommended you to my friends in the Alley, and I certainly wouldn't have allowed you to escort that family home last night."

The effect of his words was electrifying. Smiling indulgently, Tom watched the emotions that flitted across Harry's face. The boy had looked amazed at first, then suspicious, as though unable to believe what he'd been told. Next, he had looked very hard at Tom, scrutinizing him closely as though searching for signs of falsehood, then finally... finally, Harry had believed him. His eyes had lost the look of ill-concealed dread, his posture had relaxed slightly, and the wholehearted smile that lit up his face was worth a million Galleons.

The talk had gone a bit more smoothly after that. Tom knew Harry hadn't told him everything, but they'd hit the high points on quite a few topics before it was time to get the dining room ready for breakfast. Harry had seemed to sense that Tom had been genuinely frightened by what he'd witnessed, so he shared a bit about his scar, and its apparent connection to Voldemort. He'd also admitted that he didn't get sick often, and even when he did, he seemed to shake it off overnight or within a day or so. Madam Pomphrey had also commented more than once how quickly he healed from physical injury.

Perhaps the most telling bit had been the small pieces of information Harry had shared about his muggle relatives. Or what he didn't say, rather. The boy had still been reluctant to speak on the subject, but Tom had gotten the point nonetheless. It was a shame and a disgrace, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out how it had gone on for so long unnoticed, but there it was, plain as day. The Boy-Who-Lived, the child who every witch and wizard in the magical world assumed had everything he wanted given to him in abundance,

actually had very little. It was beyond Tom's comprehension how such a daft mistake could have been made.

Those horribly oversized clothes had been hand-me-downs from his cousin. The clothes Harry had bought for himself had been the first new ones he'd had since he was a toddler. Evidently, his relatives had done exactly what they'd had to, and nothing more. Harry had been given food to eat, clothes to wear, a place to sleep, and medical attention when there was no other choice, but he had clearly been denied many other intangible things that children need to thrive and grow. No wonder he'd seemed so amazed when Hagrid had brought him to the Leaky Cauldron for the first time.

The kitchen clock had finally chimed a warning, when it was time to set the tables. Harry had given Tom a half smile, and excused himself to "go fetch Jim." Tom watched until he vanished into the stairwell, marveling at the resilience and quiet strength the boy demonstrated. All things considered, it was a bloody miracle he'd turned out as well as he had.

Realizing he still had Dumbledore's letter in his hand, Tom tucked it back into his pocket with a sigh. It had been obvious from the headmaster's correspondence that he hadn't had the foggiest notion that Harry was at the Leaky Cauldron. He had intended to take the boy to task about it, but their conversation this morning had made him pause.

Harry had assured him that he was communicating with Dumbledore, and passing along any useful information about his scar and You-Know-Who, and further, he had shared that Albus had warned him against going to his friends' houses, which was why he'd wound up at the Leaky Cauldron in the first place.

As he wandered into the dining room, and started setting up, Tom pondered his dilemma. On one hand, it felt wrong to withhold something of this magnitude from the Hogwarts Headmaster. On the other hand, Potter was deeply afraid of something. He wasn't even sure the boy could articulate what was bothering him if asked. He wondered if he was nervous about being sent back to his muggle relatives. He wondered if Harry's fears were justified.

He let the vicious circle continue for a little while before deciding to let the matter ride, at least for now. Harry was safe enough, in his disguise. No one had recognized him. No one had even suspected. That was another benefit of him being famous. Harry Potter wasn't expected to willingly work. The thought never occurred to people.

That was all well and good, but they'd need to be cautious. Lucius Malfoy had been on the Alley yesterday, and soon the shops would be full of people who would likely recognize young Mr. Potter. Perhaps he should talk to Harry about telling a few of the other shopkeepers so they could keep an eye out for him--watch his back--sort of like they had a couple of summers ago.

Monday, July 17, 1995

Professor Minerva McGonagall distastefully brushed at the soot on her summer weight robes as she emerged from the fireplace in her office at Hogwarts. Aside from the obvious, one of the more irksome consequences of Voldemort's return was the restrictions that Dumbledore had put on travel. She enjoyed apparating to Hogsmeade, then walking to Hogwarts when the weather was pleasant, but no one had been available to accompany her, so she'd had to use the Floo System, or her Order portkey.

The Transfiguration professor paused to open her window, before settling at her desk. Letters to the students had to be sent out at the end of the month, she owed Flourish and Blotts a booklist, and a projected count of students and she hadn't even started to prepare.

Luckily most of the Hogwarts staff had already turned in their projected schedules and requested texts for the new term. The only problem was the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. There couldn't very well be a syllabus and supply list when there wasn't a professor available to compose it. Minerva supposed if worse came to worse, she could always put down the text by Quentin Trimble. Many of the returning students already had it, and it was better than forcing the students to buy all of Gilderoy Lockhart's books again.

The Deputy Headmistress had just finished sorting her colleagues' supply lists into seven piles, one for each group of students at Hogwarts, when an express owl flew in her open window, and dropped a thick parchment envelope on her desk, before wheeling around, and fluttering off again.

Curiously, Minerva picked up the envelope, only to cringe when she read the return address. Flourish and Blotts. Mr. Reed was probably wondering where the information she owed him was. Sighing, she broke the wax seal on the envelope, and pulled out a stack of parchment. Several sheets were bound together, making sleek printed booklet, and there was a letter on top:

Dear Professor McGonagall:

I hope this letter finds you in good health, and enjoying your summer holiday. I trust I will be receiving the book lists and student counts for the new term at Hogwarts very soon, so that I may have the requested materials in stock.

Now that I have taken care of that bit of business, I shall proceed to the real reason I am writing. Enclosed, you should find a booklet of sorts. It is the guide for muggleborn first years.

Minerva closed her eyes, and muttered something uncomplimentary under her breath. How many times were they going to have to go through this fruitless exercise? The muggleborn guide was an absolutely brilliant idea that had failed miserably once it was put into practice. Every now and then Mr. Reed felt the need to try again, and each time she and the other Heads of House had to deal with the hopeless confusion it caused in the new muggleborn first years.

I know what you're probably thinking, the letter continued, almost as if Geoffrey could read her mind. I had given up as well, but I think we finally have something that will work.

Instead of asking someone who has lived in the magical world all their lives to try and imagine what muggleborns go through, I went straight to the source. This update was done by a Hogwarts student--a muggleborn upperclassman. It was so amazingly simple, I don't

know why we didn't consider it before. Additionally, the boy has written the information in a very casual and lighthearted manner. I think the children will respond more favorably since it isn't as stiff and formal as the original.

Please take a few minutes to look it over, and if you agree with me, perhaps it could be sent out with this years' letters. I think we finally have a document that will do what we intended from the start. I want to post this immediately, so I do not miss you sending out the letters.

McGonagall chuckled softly. If he only knew! The oh-so-efficient deputy headmistress was definitely not present at this time.

I'm sure you'll notice there is no author credited on the booklet. For some reason, the boy seems very bashful, and uncertain of his own abilities. I told him that you'd want to know who produced this wonderful bit of work, but at this time, he wishes to remain anonymous. Perhaps we can change his mind for the second printing, although I'm certain you'll recognize his writing style--it's quite distinctive.

One last thing, he made another suggestion that I felt had merit. Along with the new muggle guide, perhaps we could invite the new muggleborns to come to Diagon Alley in groups, and be met and guided through their first magical shopping excursion. In the future, if this turns out well, you and the Headmaster will undoubtedly want to assign Prefects, or accept volunteers yourselves, but since it is rather late in the summer, the author has offered to perform the function.

You may be reluctant to accept the boy's offer "sight unseen" as it were, but he has been in my employ part-time this summer, and I am confident that he will be able to perform admirably. If you agree, then please divide the incoming first years into groups, and assign them a date. We will, of course be happy to try and accommodate anyone who cannot keep their assigned date.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey Reed
General Manager, Flourish & Blotts

Intrigued, now, in spite of herself, Minerva, laid the letter aside, and regarded the booklet. Sighing, she looked at the piles of parchment on her desk. She really shouldn't dally, if she was going to get the letters out on time. Still, if Geoffrey was right... This was something that had been needed for far too long, and the document didn't appear to be horribly lengthy.

Adjusting her square-framed glasses McGonagall flipped the booklet over and began to read. When she read the title, she smiled. Halfway through the first page, she was impressed. By the time she'd reached the end of it, she'd broken into fits of laughter two or three times. Dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief, the Deputy Headmistress laid the booklet aside, and shook her head. Reed was right. It was inspired. Exactly what they'd envisioned all those years ago. The author, whoever he was, was concise and clear, with a dry wit and a slightly irreverent sense of humor.

Frowning, McGonagall flipped through the document again. She didn't recognize the writing style immediately, but then again, she probably wouldn't. The homework assignments and essays she received from students usually had a much more formal tone. Smiling again, she picked up the booklet, and went off in search of Professor Dumbledore. Technically, she didn't really need the Headmaster's approval, registration was one of her duties after all, but she couldn't help thinking Albus could probably use a good laugh too.

* Temporis Spatium is Latin for "Duration"

Chapter 18 - Converging Lines

Thursday, July 20, 1995

Arthur Weasley sighed as he packed his briefcase, and tidied his desk for the evening. The last few days had been extraordinarily stressful.

Shaking his head ruefully, Arthur recalled how he'd stomped up to the Burrow, Harry's window bars in hand, full of fierce indignation on the boy's behalf. Originally, he'd planned to use the Floo System, but the bars had been rather wide, so he'd decided to use his Order portkey instead.

After assuring Ron and Ginny that he would do his best to help Harry, and promising Molly he'd send word if he'd be long, Arthur had gone out in the yard, pulled his phoenix pendant out of his robes, and activated it. Molly had considered accompanying him, but thankfully, she had opted to stay behind with her two youngest children when they insisted on coming along as well.

Arthur shuddered at the implications of that scenario. It had disaster written all over it. Molly, Ron, and Ginny would have led a Dursley-finding expedition right then and there, regardless of what time it happened to be in Perth, Australia.

Arthur smiled fondly, as his eyes slid over the framed wizard photos on his desk. Ron and Ginny, bless them, were closest to Molly in temperament, and Percy wasn't far behind. Although he tended to be less vocal, his middle son was just as stubborn as the others, and very firm in his beliefs. Sometimes a bit too firm, really.

The other Weasley sons, were more like their father in that regard, but his cheerful good nature could be deceptive, and had taken many people by surprise. Arthur had a higher tolerance and a longer fuse than Molly did, but once he was at the end of it, his temper could rival, even surpass his fiery little wife's.

Arthur picked up a large outdoor group shot he had taken only last summer, and lightly ran his fingers over the glass. Molly was there,

and all the children. He had always been fond of this captured moment in time. It was an exceptionally good picture, yes, but recently, it had become especially cherished because it seemed to represent a more innocent time.

It had been taken before the fiasco at the Quidditch World Cup, before the TriWizard Tournament, before Cedric's death and before You-Know-Who's return. All the problems he'd had back then had been small, petty details--nothing to get in a flap over. Bill and Charlie had been home for the World Cup. For just a few days, all his children had been back at the Burrow again.

He chuckled softly as the group smiled and waved at him, their excitement and anticipation evident. Eight red heads, one brown, one black.

Harry. Arthur's smile turned a bit wistful as he studied the Boy-Who-Lived. He stood just right of center, flanked by Hermione and Ron, and surrounded by the rest of the Weasley clan. For reasons he couldn't explain, this photo made Arthur think of a raven, perched in the branches of a blooming rose bush.

Hermione, though not red-headed, actually blended in rather well, the wizard noted, as he regarded the brown-eyed witch. She wasn't as immediately obvious as Harry was. With his jet black hair, and almost feline green eyes, he stood out like a sore thumb. Where are you, Harry? What are you up to? I swear I just don't understand what goes through that head of yours sometimes.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, Arthur set the picture back on his desk, took one last look 'round, then doused the lights with a wave of his wand. Picking up his briefcase, he left his office, heading for the exit.

He'd stirred up more than he meant to when he'd appeared in the Hogwarts Hospital wing. The weight of the bars had pulled him off balance, and he'd very nearly wound up in Sirius Black's lap. He'd come very close to hexing the man out of reflex before recalling that he was innocent and stopping himself just in time. Sirius had been sitting beside Remus' bed, watching as the werewolf gathered his

things together. Madam Pomphrey had evidently just given him permission to leave, and the werewolf was wasting no time in making good his escape.

Black and Lupin had been curious about the bars, however, and had accompanied him to Professor Dumbledore's office. On the way they had run into Severus Snape and Arabella Figg.

The meeting that followed had been a real eye-opener, but toward the end of it, Arthur had found himself in a delicate position. Normally he stood firm in his belief that honesty was the best policy, but that night he had faltered. Dumbledore hadn't expressly sworn them to silence, but he had been very adamant that Harry's relocation be kept as quiet as possible. The press wouldn't be able to resist running a story on young Potter, and even if they weren't trying to keep word of this from getting back to You-Know-Who, Harry's muggle relatives packing up and vanishing with no warning was an opportunity ripe for exploitation by the Daily Prophet.

In the end, after weighing the pros and cons, he'd decided to just keep it to himself. He'd tell the rest of the family after the fact, once Harry was safely back. They wouldn't be pleased with him, but they'd come around. He'd reckoned that Albus would probably let the boy stay at Hogwarts, or perhaps with Lupin until they could finish warding the Burrow. Then he'd remembered that the house was done. If Harry agreed to remain indoors until the work was completed, there was no reason why he couldn't come to stay immediately once he was retrieved.

Feeling quite a bit more cheerful, Arthur had calmly met his family's anxious questions when he'd flooed back to the Burrow: He'd left the bars with Dumbledore, no, Harry wasn't with him, yes, Harry would most likely be removed from his relatives' guardianship, and no, he wasn't sure where Harry would be staying in the meantime.

It had taken a while, but they had eventually subsided. Even Fred and George had come downstairs to join in the discussion, which was something, considering they'd all but hidden in their room since the beginning of summer. Arthur knew that his family hadn't been completely satisfied with his answers, but all in all it had gone

surprisingly well. His mood had been rather self-congratulatory when he'd finally gone upstairs to bed.

Arthur's brow creased thoughtfully as he continued down the corridor. Monday morning had been a different matter. He'd been at the breakfast table with the rest of the family, when he'd received a flook call from Arabella Figg.

She had apologized profusely for interrupting their meal, then asked if it would be possible for Arthur to come 'round for a few minutes before he went to work. Trying to act nonchalant, and ignore his family's curious stares, Arthur had agreed, and left soon after. Fortunately, the time had been such, that he'd really only had time to finish the toast he'd been eating and drain his teacup, before kissing Molly goodbye, calling fondly to the children, and stepping into the fireplace.

It hadn't taken them long to fill him in. Remus had been quick to assure him that it was still possible that Harry was with the Dursleys in Australia, and hopefully this was a purely precautionary exercise.

Sirius, on the other hand, seemed convinced that Harry was still in Britain, and scowled darkly at his friend's backpedaling. "That was Harry's scent you picked up and you know it," he scolded the werewolf. "Harry was at the Leaky Cauldron, Arthur. The question now becomes 'How long ago?'"

Remus had fidgeted, and looked uncomfortable. "Well, if it was him, the fact that I could pick him up at all is telling. In that kind of scent-rich environment, it's difficult to pick up old trails, unless I know exactly what I'm looking for. I didn't even notice Harry's scent here immediately, between the cats and the potion Belle brews for her arthritis. Unless I got exceptionally lucky, that seems to indicate that he was either there recently, has been there a lot, or he was there while we were."

Arthur hadn't been able to believe his fellow Order members could be so dense. "Don't be thick, Remus," he blurted, when Lupin stopped talking. "Clearly, he's staying at the Leaky Cauldron! You've found him! We can fetch him now!"

Arabella had stopped him, though, shaking her head regretfully. "Not unless Tom's changed his operating policy. I checked the register while we were there," she informed Arthur, while lifting a mildly reproving eyebrow. "He wasn't listed as a guest."

"He might have convinced Tom to cover for him, or he could be there under an assumed name," Sirius had said dismissively. "He didn't give the Knight Bus driver his true name when he ran away from the Dursley's the summer before his third year. Oh stop it!" he snapped when Arthur and Arabella looked faintly shocked. "Whatever else he may be, Harry's not stupid. Besides, if he'd been identified by anyone, it would be all over the news by now."

"The Leaky Cauldron is on our list of places to check out," Remus told Arthur pacifyingly. "We'll get there. However, since we know Harry was at King's Cross Station, Arabella and I thought we'd start there, then try to retrace his movements. We're fairly certain he took the Knight Bus from here, so we'll need to try and get a look at their travel log. Arabella knows which company is handling the sale of the Dursley's property, so we plan to speak to them, and perhaps Grunnings as well."

"But, for heaven's sake be discreet!" Arabella interjected, giving Sirius a particularly hard look. You never know who's around, and word of this, especially if Harry is no longer in his relatives' care, must not get back to You-Know-Who! It doesn't matter as much in the muggle world, but with the Knight Bus, for instance, don't let them know that you're searching for Harry Potter. There are no other witches and wizards living in this neighborhood, and the wards that are triggered by unauthorized magical persons haven't been activated since the Weasleys picked Harry up last summer. If the Knight Bus came to this vicinity while I was at Hogwarts or on assignment, it's highly likely that Harry summoned it."

Arthur had, of course, agreed to help in any way possible, although privately he considered the scenario a little far-fetched. While he couldn't deny that Harry was a capable lad, he just couldn't quite accept the idea that the Boy-Who-Lived was currently wandering around unnoticed. He could still clearly picture the excursion to

Diagon Alley the summer before Ginny's first year. Harry had been in Flourish & Blotts with the rest of the kids, simply standing and minding his own business, when Lockhart, the great idiot, had spotted him and practically started a riot.

Remembering, the Weasley patriarch sighed again. He felt for the boy, he really did. Wealth wouldn't be so bad, but he didn't think he'd fancy being famous. It was just short of idiotic how everyone carried on, ready to idolize or vilify Harry at the drop of a hat. Even his own family hadn't been immune. Ginny had been almost embarrassingly star-struck over a five-second meeting at King's Cross Station, Ron had been spiteful and jealous when Harry's name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, and dear Molly had been taken in by Rita Skeeter's vicious muckraking.

Arthur chuckled when he recalled the incident. One would have thought one of their own sons had been slighted the way she carried on! Unfortunately it had been Hermione rather than Rita Skeeter who'd borne the brunt of his wife's reaction.

The trouble was, the more time that passed, the more he began to wonder if Black might just have the right of it. He had approached the project rather half-heartedly at first, certain that it was a fruitless exercise, and his time could be well spent doing more useful things, but the more they poked around, the more tiny clues they uncovered.

Weasley grimaced as he considered the thought, and fervently hoped against hope that Dumbledore would be contacting them soon with the news that Harry had been retrieved. His family would probably understand the Australia scenario, but if it turned out that the boy had gone missing, he'd be well and truly in the doghouse for a long time to come.

"Hey, Tom!" Janet Wright called cheerfully, as she and her daughters entered the Leaky Cauldron. She glanced around a bit, then asked, "Where's the Sparkster?"

"Oh, he's helping out at the book store this afternoon," Tom said, consulting his pocket watch. "I'm expecting him back any time now," he added kindly when both girls' faces fell.

Well, we'll just have to wait, I guess," Janet said with a shrug. "In the meantime, we've come for our usual!" she grinned, wagging her two-quart plastic pitcher as she and her daughters took seats at the bar.

"Of course, dear, won't be a minute," Tom said jovially, pausing to ruffle Kitty's hair and tweak Becky's nose before accepting the pitcher and heading for the kitchen.

Janet and her girls were fast becoming regulars at the Leaky Cauldron. Kitty and Becky, it seemed, had taken a liking to pumpkin juice, and requested that their mother purchase some. Janet had been agreeable, since pumpkin juice seemed to be more healthful than some other drinks her children were partial to, and had added it to her grocery list.

Chuckling as he entered the kitchen, Tom filled the pitcher as requested. Oh, he would have loved to have been there when poor Janet tried to explain what she wanted to the local green grocer. What was even better, was he had asked her if pumpkin juice was some barmy American thing! He and Harry had laughed quite hard when she'd told them that.

"Yeah, well," Mrs. Wright had said with a shrug, snickering a bit herself. "I must have gone to four places before I finally realized that pumpkin juice must be a specialty of the house. I don't suppose you sell it in larger quantities, do you?" Tom didn't, normally, but he'd quickly agreed, and the current Bring-Your-Own-Container deal had been struck.

Actually, he was glad of their blossoming friendship. Besides the fact that he simply liked them, Janet and her girls were good for young Potter. The little ones thought he could walk on water, and he and Janet had evidently hit it off as well. She was having a bit of trouble trying to learn "English," and Harry was having great fun "educating" her.

Tom had watched this process carefully, ready to step in if necessary. James Potter might have thought it funny, at that age, to fill an unsuspecting person's head with a lot of stuff and nonsense, but by all appearances, this thought never occurred to Harry.

Of course the learning was a two way street. Just recently, they'd been trying to arrange a visit, and had been having difficulty determining what time she would come by to collect him. Janet had laughed until tears ran down her cheeks, when Harry had finally shrugged and told her to just "knock him up" whenever it was convenient.

When he finished measuring out the juice, Tom snapped the lid back on the pitcher, and wandered back to the bar. "Thanks, Tom," Mrs. Wright said, handing him a few pounds. "It's nice of you to cater to us like this."

"My pleasure," the innkeeper replied, pocketing the muggle bills, and smiling at them. He was just about to ask if he could get them anything else, when Kitty smiled and waved, and Becky clapped and giggled. "'Parky! 'Parky!" she crowed, holding her arms up in an irresistible demand for attention.

Tom turned, and saw Harry standing in the kitchen doorway, a look of pleased surprise on his face. "Just in time, Mr. Patterson," he said with a flourish. "These lovely young ladies have been waiting to have a word with you."

Harry smiled at what was fast becoming one of his favorite muggle families (along with the Grangers.) He grinned at Janet, then scooped Becky up, and tugged playfully on one of Kitty's pigtails. "Hey, Kit," he said to the brown-haired girl. "Hi Snidget," he greeted the blue-eyed toddler.

Janet watched the way he interacted with her children, and smiled fondly. Kitty, bless her, was not an unattractive child, but all too often she was overlooked because of her sister. One of the things she liked most about Jim, and Tom too, was the way they could divide their attention between the girls, so no one felt left out.

"So is there anything I can do for you, or is this a social call?" Harry asked, wincing as Becky grabbed a lock of his hair, and extracted vengeance for her sister. "Ouch! Not so hard, Becky," he admonished lightly.

Janet shook her head and rolled her eyes at the effect his gentle rebuff had on her daughter. She was instantly contrite in a way she never was with mere parental scolding.

"I wanted to know if you would be available to babysit for me on Saturday evening," she informed the boy, watching, amused, as Becky kissed her fingertips then pressed them against Harry's head to 'make it all better.' "I apologize for the short notice, but it just dawned on me that I had someone I could ask to watch them. Steve's flight gets in a little late in the evening, and it's going to take a while to get to and from the airport. It's going to be a long trip, and the kids will be tired and crabby. I'd rather not drag them out if I don't have to."

"Well, I'd like to help, but I've never done that before," Harry said uncertainly, setting Becky back down next to her mother. "What would I be expected to do?"

Janet shrugged. "Same thing you did the other night when you distracted the kids so I could unpack in peace." She started ticking off choices on her fingers. "Read, color, play games, watch videos... I'll make sure they've had their dinners and baths before I leave. You make sure the house doesn't fall down, entertain them for a little while, then put them to bed."

Harry shrugged. He could do that. "Okay," he agreed, while the girls voiced their approval.

When they quieted down, Janet became all business. "Great. How much do you charge?"

"Charge?"

"Yeah. What's the going rate here in London?" When Harry continued to stare at her blankly she prompted, "People usually get

compensated for their time when they look after other people's children."

"Uhhhh..." Harry was lost. She wanted to pay him for playing with her kids and watching movies?

"Well, you can ask all your girlfriends what they charge. Just go easy on me, okay? I just moved and I haven't started my new job yet," Janet said, eyes twinkling with amusement. "As a matter of fact," she went on a second later, "I imagine we'll be getting back fairly late. If you want to, you could just bring a change of clothes and crash on the couch. I know Tom has you up with the chickens getting everything ready for breakfast."

Harry wasn't sure about that. What would happen if he had another nightmare? "Let me get back to you on that," he hedged. "I need to see what my schedule is."

"Sounds good. Thanks, Spark. I appreciate it."

"Anytime."

Petunia Dursley sniffed discontentedly at the state of her living room, and doggedly reached for another box. The last six weeks or so had been the most frightening, turbulent, and topsy-turvy days she had ever experienced.

It had all started back at the beginning of June. Vernon had come home with the news that Grunnings was expanding, and he had been offered the chance oversee one of the new sites. At the time it had seemed terribly exciting. It was a wonderful opportunity for Vernon, after all. There were several sites available in Britain, so they would not disrupt Dudley's schooling, Vernon would receive a promotion, and Grunnings would pay all their moving and travel expenses.

Although staying in England was an option, they had toyed with the idea of living abroad as well. If they didn't go too far away, Dudley could come stay with them for his Christmas and summer holidays, and perhaps spend Easter with his Aunt Marge. Vernon had always

wanted a vacation home in Majorca, so they had considered Spain, France, and Northern Africa. Any of those places would allow them to pop over to Majorca for an odd weekend holiday, and they wouldn't be straying too terribly far from the United Kingdom.

Plans set for two possible scenarios, they had begun casual preparations. Once Vernon had told his superiors that he would be agreeable to such an arrangement, they had begun packing seldom-used items, and identifying items for disposal. Always organized, Petunia had drawn up a schedule of things that had to be done, assuming they would be leaving at the end of Dudley's summer holiday.

Harry, she hadn't worried about. He didn't bother coming home for Christmas and Easter, which she was frankly glad of, and he hadn't spent the entire summer holiday with them since he'd started attending that freak school. She had planned to get as much work out of him as possible, while he was there, then he would probably want to go visit that horrid red-headed family again.

Actually, she hadn't been inclined to let those destructive animals anywhere near her household ever again, especially after what they did to poor Dudders last summer, but she and Vernon had been faced with the problem of what to do with Harry when they moved.

As distasteful as it was, she and Vernon had decided to have Harry write that gang of ruffians, and inquire as to whether he could stay with them next summer. The summer after, he would turn seventeen. He would be of age in that freak world of his, and would no longer be her concern.

Then it had arrived. That damnable letter. The letter that informed her that Harry had been forced to participate in some insane tournament, one of his classmates was dead, and the monster that killed her sister had been reborn.

The monster that had a deep abiding hatred for half-bloods and muggles.

The letter had gone on, discussing safety precautions and the like, but Petunia had barely registered it. He would be after Harry in an instant. She and her family would never stand a chance! They had to run! Hide! The boy could no longer stay with them.

After that things had happened very fast. Suddenly it had been not just important, but imperative that they get themselves and Dudley as far away as possible. Equally important, they had to get their hands on and destroy as many of Harry's legal records as possible. The boy must not be traced back to them!

Actually, it had been amazing how conveniently things had fallen into place. Vernon had rushed to work the following Monday to see if it was possible to move up their timetable. As if by providence, a time-sensitive position in had come open, that had to be filled immediately. Something had happened to the person who was supposed to run the site. For once in her life, Petunia neither knew nor cared what had happened.

Vernon had snapped it up, of course, and had been given a bonus and a Special Recognition Award for his trouble. The fact that it happened to be in Australia was so much the better. Petunia wanted as much distance between her and Britain as possible at the moment. She wasn't sure if Vernon understood properly, but he was happy to be getting rid of the boy.

The next few days had been a blur. Packing and cleaning had been done in one mad rush. Most of the little improvements they'd planned on making to the house over the summer had been abandoned, since they no longer had two months to prepare. Everything had to be done right now, and most of the work had fallen on Petunia. Besides packing and cleaning, she'd dealt with estate agents, asked for the utilities to be disconnected, hired movers, and made travel arrangements. Her husband and son had been of little help, since Vernon was trying to get his affairs in order at work, and Dudley hadn't arrived from school.

As it was, they'd barely had time to see the movers off, leave the key with the company selling their house, meet Dudley's train, and get to the airport in time to catch their plane. When Dudley had asked after

Harry, he'd been told that his cousin would no longer be staying with them. Shrugging, Dudley had accepted their story without comment. They'd taken off, heading for the Land Down Under at approximately the same time Harry would be arriving at King's Cross.

Petunia had felt a small niggle of guilt, which she'd squashed ruthlessly. Harry would either go directly home with that Weasley family, or else he had his owl. He could write to his blasted godfather to come and collect him. One way or another the boy would be looked after. Those freaks always looked after their own. It was the nonmagical folk who were left to their own devices. All Lily's fancy powers hadn't been enough to save their parents, and now she was gone.

Arriving in Australia had been a shock. Petunia knew about the weather phenomenon, of course, but it still hadn't prepared her. They were experiencing winter still, and Dudley had been less than pleased to learn that he'd be starting school again once they got settled. Grunnings had arranged for them to view several houses in Perth's many suburbs, so they'd spent about ten days looking at properties. Once they had selected one, they'd seen to the business of enrolling Dudley in one of the finer private schools. It would be a change for them all for Duddy to be returning home from school each day instead of living on site as he had at Smeltings.

Petunia sighed as she poked through a hopelessly disorganized box. Toward the end, they'd been literally throwing anything and everything in whatever container they could find. There simply hadn't been time to do a proper job of it. She sighed, thinking longingly of the way she'd planned to have Harry help her pack, organize, and catalog the contents of every box. The boy might be an abnormal freak, but he did have his uses. The unpacking wasn't going as smoothly or quickly as she wanted, but all things considered, she was making good time.

A knock on the door made her look up. "Who on earth could that be?" she wondered aloud as she went to answer it. When she opened the door, she found herself facing a sandy-haired man in khakis who looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties.

"G'day!" he greeted her brightly. "The name's Nathaniel Baker. I'm trying to locate Vernon or Petunia Dursley."

"I'm Petunia Dursley."

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Dursley. Welcome to Western Australia."

Relaxing a bit, Petunia nodded graciously, then accepted the man's proffered hand, and shook it. "Thank you, Mr. Baker," she said sneaking a quick look at her disheveled living room. "I'm afraid I'm not prepared to entertain. I'm in the middle of unpacking and really quite busy."

"No worries, miss," Nate said amiably, waving off her concern. "I'll just take a minute of your time. I've come 'round to fetch young Harry Potter as a favor to one of me mates in the International Confederation of Wizards. If you'll kindly direct me to the lad, his presence is required at Hogwarts."

Petunia closed her eyes and paled.

Chapter 19 - Did You Ever Have One of Those Days?

Friday, July 21, 1995

"Whatta ya mean 'I don't think so?'" a highly indignant voice demanded, breaking the drowsy after-lunch-rush lull in the Leaky Cauldron's main dining room.

Tom sighed as he regarded the angry blonde witch in front of him. "Cassandra, do be reasonable," he began, but she cut him off, her smokey gray eyes glittering angrily.

"What's the matter? My Galleons not gold enough for you?" she demanded, whipping out her money pouch and throwing it on the bar in disgust. "Want to look at one? Make sure it isn't gilded lead?"

"Of course not, but--"

"What's the kid's going rate? I'm sure Marty will beat it. Hell, he might even double it!"

Tom shook his head, and made little pacifying gestures with his hands. "It isn't about money, Cassie. You and Martin and Silas have been good customers for years!" he soothed, trying to calm her.

Cassandra Wallis was usually rather easy to get along with, as long as you stayed away from certain sore subjects. Money was first in the queue. Hogwarts was a close second. She had not returned to the castle after her fifth year, when her father's unexpected death had wreaked havoc with the family finances. Things appeared to be better for her now, but for reasons Tom was not privy to, she had not made any attempt to complete her magical training.

It was a shame, really. She'd evidently made a good showing on her OWLs. Tom didn't know exactly how these things worked, but he reckoned all she would really need to do was study up and pass her NEWTs. It was beyond him why, three summers later, she still hadn't pursued this course of action.

"Well what is it, then?" Cassandra demanded, snatching up her money pouch and re-fastening it to her belt. "Dammit, Tom, we need the help! I don't think we've ever been this shorthanded! Sean has the flu and Bryce and Tammy quit unexpectedly. Didn't even have the manners to give a few days notice," she fumed, planting her hands on her hips and scowling at him. "Word on the street is the kid's willing, and a hard worker. Why can't we schedule some of his time?"

Tom fought the urge to sigh again. Lancaster's, the store where she worked, was actually very nice. They sold a wide variety of magical gadgets, and carried a specialized line of enchanted clothing. Tom was quite sure Harry would have no trouble selecting something or other that he would like to earn, even if it wasn't exactly school related, or, as Cassandra pointed out, they could simply pay him.

No, it wasn't the store that was the problem, it was the location.

Lancaster's was on Knockturn Alley.

Contrary to popular belief, a shop on Knockturn Alley wasn't automatically a den of iniquity. Lancaster's was okay. The potion shop that carried the Mark Remover was all right. There was even a cluster of stores farther down that formed an "industrial" section of sorts. They specialized in professional strength products that required careful handling, and were a little too potent for casual use.

Tom directed magical folk to shops on Knockturn Alley more often than one might think. As a matter of fact, he had referred the Hogwarts Groundskeeper, Rubeus Hagrid, to a potion manufacturer in the industrial area a few summers ago. The half-giant had been battling a flesh-eating slug infestation in the school cabbages, and the household-strength repellants he'd tried just hadn't been doing the job.

No, it was some of the other stores, Borgin and Burkes for example, and the crowd they attracted that gave Knockturn Alley its rather unsavory reputation. Tom got the collywobbles just thinking about some of those places and the things they sold. Unfortunately, since some of them were located near the intersection where Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley met, they discouraged casual foot traffic, and

made the more "respectable" businesses rather dependent on adverts and referrals.

The soft tapping of a booted foot brought Tom back to the present. Guiltily, he realized he'd been silent just a tad too long. When he looked up at Cassandra, her eyes were narrowed suspiciously.

"Is this because he'd be on Knockturn Alley?" she challenged.

Well, there's no point in lying, Tom thought with a heavy sigh. "Yes," he admitted, sadly.

"Tom!" Cass looked hurt now, and the betrayed disbelief in her voice made his name sound like an accusation. "Martin Lancaster runs a perfectly respectable business and you know it!" she flared, fiercely protective of the man who'd given her a job and another chance when she'd had to abandon her magical training. "We don't cater to the nutters who want poisoned daggers and cursed jewels, and all that other rubbish! The kid would be perfectly safe!"

"I know that Cassandra. Truly I do," Tom said regretfully. "But the fact remains, that Knockturn Alley can be a dangerous place. I have concerns for the boy's safety outside your shop, and I simply do not have the time to escort him!"

"So send him by Floo!" she countered in exasperation. "That's how most of our customers arrive, anyway." She rolled her eyes at older wizard's surprised look. "Honestly, Tom! Marty doesn't keep six separate fireplaces connected to the network just to enhance the decor, you know."

Brought up short, Tom found there wasn't much he could say to that. It was a good solution, after all. Thankfully he was spared having to think up an excuse when the door leading to Diagon Alley was wrenched open and slammed forcefully shut, making the bells jangle and thump noisily against the wood.

He and Cassandra just had time to turn toward the interruption before the smell hit them. Merlin! Tom gasped, covering his nose and mouth with one hand, and blinking his watering eyes, while Cassie choked

and waved her hand in front of her face beside him. It wasn't a bad smell exactly, just...overpowering.

Stomping footsteps and dark muttering could now be heard, coming closer all the time. What in the name of goodness had just entered the pub? "Blimey! I think you overdid it just a bit with the cologne there mate," Tom managed to croak.

"Why thank you, Tom, for that kind assessment."

Tom's eyes flew open in surprise, in spite of his discomfort. "Sparky??!" he said incredulously, before clapping a hand over his mouth to trap his laughter.

Oh, yes. In spite of the unaccustomed note of sarcasm in his voice, it was Harry all right. He was standing in front of the other two now, looking highly offended with his arms crossed defensively on his chest. He was absolutely soaked in some viscous fluid, he reeked to high heaven, and to add insult to injury, his skin, clothes, and shoes were tinted a delicate pink.

"Do I even want to know what happened?" Tom asked, swallowing his laughter, but unable to keep a broad smile off his face.

Harry twisted his mouth and wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Probably not," he mumbled.

"I didn't think so," Tom said jovially, then remembered the witch beside him. "Cassandra Wallis, this is Jim Patterson, better known as Sparky," he said, indicating Harry with a flourish.

"Pleasure," Cassie said, smiling devilishly at Harry's confusion as he glanced from her outstretched hand, to his rather sticky one. "You really get into your work I see," she commented archly, earning herself a harassed look from Potter, as he wiped his hand on the leg of his jeans, trying to clean the worst of the mess off of it before carefully taking her hand. She was amused when he gave it a light shake, and released it almost immediately.

"Actually, this was sort of a special occasion," the boy replied, with an embarrassed half grin. When she raised an inquiring eyebrow, he elaborated a bit. "A couple of blokes were trying to deliver some ultra-concentrated scent solutions to Mrs. Fillmore but they had the wrong address," he said with a little shrug, referring to the manager of the Diagon Alley potion shop. "They were looking for a shop on Knockturn Alley."

Ah, yes, Cassandra thought, idly recalling one of the Knockturn Alley potion manufacturers mentioning that he needed to replace some stock. Bleagh! No wonder the smell was so strong! He had been talking about making the sort of heavy-duty deodorizers used in public loos and things of that nature.

Tom, meanwhile, saw an opportunity. He wanted to talk to Harry about the location of Lancaster's before Cassie asked to be added to his queue. "Erm, not to be rude, Sparky," Tom cut in before the boy could continue, "but if this is going to be a long story, I'd really be grateful if you'd nip up to your room and shower first." There. She probably wouldn't want to wait. He'd talk to Harry, and they could send his regrets by owl or Floo later.

Harry, of course, had to pick now of all times to be difficult. He paused, initially, looking a little taken aback, then his eyes began to sparkle mischievously. "And waste all this freshener?" he asked, seemingly horrified at the very notion. "I reckoned I'd take a little walk 'round first. The Leaky Cauldron can get dreadfully musty, don't you think?"

"Sparky," Tom said in a mock-warning tone.

Harry ignored him and continued to speculate. "And didn't you say we were serving fish and chips this evening?" he asked brightly. "Could come in handy, you know," he grinned, shaking a knowing finger at Tom.

"Sparky," Tom almost groaned, knowing for certain that things were about to get out of hand. She would ask and he would accept without thinking to question her, especially if she brought up how much they needed the help. Then he'd be committed. He was considering

dragging the boy bodily into the kitchen, when Cassie unexpectedly came to his rescue.

"Oh let him freshen the place if he likes, Tom," she said airily. "Once you get used to the smell it isn't so bad. Tea rose, isn't it?" she said, sniffing delicately, and directing the last bit at Potter.

Harry looked mortified, and Tom gaped at her in disbelief.

"Besides," she purred with a throaty chuckle, reaching out and giving Harry's shirt sleeve a little tweak, "I haven't met many boys his age who are so comfortable wearing pink."

Tom grinned widely as Harry's mortification turned into stark horror, and broke into hearty guffaws when the boy muttered something like, "I think I'll go take that shower now," and fled into the kitchen. "That wasn't a very nice thing to do," he lightly admonished his companion when he got his laughter under control.

The blonde witch shrugged unrepentantly. "Worked, didn't it?" she said, grinning cheekily. "Now, how about a butterbeer while I wait?"

When Harry dove into his room a few minutes later, Patches stirred awake and hissed indignantly, and Hedwig glanced up and glared meaningfully at him before tucking her head even further under her wing.

"Okay, okay, I get the point," Harry said, raising his hands in defeat as he started toward the bathroom. "Am I at least allowed to wait until the water gets warm before I shower?" he asked, only half-jokingly.

"Blimey, Spark! What happened to you?" Crystal asked from the dresser mirror, momentarily halting his progress.

"Little accident, Crys. Nothing to get in a flap over," Harry said, shrugging dismissively before giving her a wry smile. "Don't want to be rude, but I really do need to get cleaned up."

Now there was an understatement. The rose-essence had been rather thick and sticky to begin with. Now that it had set a bit, it had the stiff, slightly tacky feel of half-dried maple syrup. Yes, a good scrub was definitely in order.

"Of course, Love. Sorry for keeping you. I'll pop in later, and I'll be sure to tell the others that you're, ah, indisposed at the moment," she called with a silvery laugh.

"Thanks, Crystal. You're all heart," Harry muttered, watching as she winked out before resuming his trek to the bathroom and turning on the shower tap.

As he waited for the water to warm, Harry peered into the mirror on the medicine cabinet, and poked experimentally at the goop on his face. It wasn't completely dry, but at least he didn't seem to be dripping anymore. That was quite good, actually. Hopefully he hadn't tracked anything in. It wasn't that Harry minded the work so much, but he didn't fancy having to mop the dining room...and the kitchen...and the back stairs...and his room...again.

Eurgh! Harry blinked his watering eyes and pinched his nose shut. The small bathroom didn't have any appreciable ventilation, and it was getting pretty cloying in there, especially since he had the door shut. Impatiently, he checked the water temperature again. The delivery wizards and Mrs. Fillmore had assured him that the concoction was water soluble, and a good, hot shower would put him to rights in no time. They'd also been fairly certain that the soft pink color of the mixture was caused by ground rose petals, not some sort of dye, so the discoloration of his skin and clothes shouldn't be permanent.

I hope they're right! Harry thought worriedly as he glanced down at himself. Besides the fact that he didn't fancy having a pink face and arms (although he reckoned that could be explained as a sunburn) he'd been afraid the mishap had ruined the clothes he'd been wearing and his new trainers. The shopping trip with Dr. Granger had been fun and all, but he hadn't planned on having to go out and purchase replacements just yet.

Smiling ruefully, he recalled all the people who had been pointing and exclaiming as he'd hurried back to the Leaky Cauldron. It had been a little off-putting at first, bringing to mind unpleasant memories of how he'd been teased and isolated in muggle primary school.

Of course, he'd be lying if he said that the patrons of Diagon Alley hadn't had a valid reason for being shocked and amused. It probably wasn't every day they had a rose-dipped wizard in their midst. It had been all right, really. Not exactly pleasant, but then no one had been deliberately cruel, either. Most had tried to stifle their laughter, and a few had even commiserated with his plight.

At least it had been better than being recognized as the Boy Who Lived, Harry mused with a derisive snort as he toed off his sneakers and shucked his shirt and jeans. Fame had its good points, he supposed, but it also had a definite downside, despite what his friend Ron might think.

The pointing and whispering that followed him everywhere he went was annoying, but the worst thing, the thing he absolutely detested, was when people stared at him. It was more than a little unnerving to be gazed upon with awe, fear, curiosity, disgust or pity. Worst of all, it always made him wonder if Aunt Petunia had the right of it after all. He didn't seem to be exactly "normal" even in the Wizarding World.

The steadily fogging mirror, and the increased heat and humidity announced louder than words that the water was ready. Grateful for something to distract him from the decidedly gloomy path his thoughts were wandering down, Harry quickly finished undressing. He regarded the pile of pink and rather fragrant clothing for a second, then shrugged and tossed the lot in the shower stall before climbing in himself.

As promised, almost as soon as the hot water hit it, the starchy mess began to dissolve. After washing his face, Harry watched, amused, as it ran down his arms and dripped from his hair, before reaching for the soap, and scrubbing hard. He found himself absently recalling the scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy splashed water on the Wicked Witch of the West. I'm melting! Mellllllting!

Harry had never seen the film, of course. Aunt Petunia would never allow such things in her house, but it was a favorite of Hermione's and she had let him read her book a while back. Actually, he'd started it just to please her, but soon found he had no trouble finishing it. She'd made Ron and himself laugh quite hard with her description of the film, and promised they could view the video when they came to visit her over the summer holidays. Unfortunately, plans hadn't worked out, and he had yet to see the film, or visit Hermione. Oh, well. Maybe this year...

When he'd finished scrubbing and rinsing, Harry picked up the shirt he'd been wearing, and held it in front of the spray. To his immense relief, the water melted the rose essence, and soon it was looking decidedly less...pink. Brill! Harry thought happily. Once it had a proper washing, it should be as good as new.

The shirt wasn't very fancy, nor had it been particularly expensive. It was, in fact, just a plain white tee with black lettering, but Harry was fond of it just the same. He'd found it in a little novelty shop, that sold shirts with witty sayings among other things. Still hopeful that a visit could be arranged, Harry had splurged a bit, and bought one for Hermione that read *So Many Books, So Little Time*, one for Ron that advised, *Don't Let Your Mind Wander...It's Too Small To Be Out On Its Own*, and this one, which read, *I'm Up And Dressed. What More Do You Want?*

A visit was looking less and less likely, though, so Harry had sent the shirts to his friends with his latest letters. Hopefully they'd like them.

Soon he was able to shut off the water and hang his garments out to drip-dry. It was also about that time he'd noticed something was missing.

Clothes, idiot. Dry clothes would be nice. He'd been in such a hurry to bathe, he'd forgotten to bring a clean set with him.

Oh, well. It was probably for the best, Harry thought reasonably, as he wrapped his towel around his middle. He rather doubted he would have been able to touch anything without getting it dirty or smelly anyway. Hopefully Crystal and her crowd wouldn't pop in while he

was changing. That would be right embarrassing, Harry thought, glancing warily at the dresser mirror to make sure he was indeed alone. He was, but something else made him lean forward, intrigued by what he saw.

Because he'd made it his habit to change clothes in the bathroom since the beginning of the holiday, Harry hadn't really seen himself in about three weeks. Oh, he'd peered into the mirror on the medicine cabinet when he put on his contacts, brushed his teeth, and checked his face for signs of spots, but that only showed his face and neck.

The mirror in the main bedroom was larger, and showed much more, but Harry hadn't paid it a lot of mind. He used it to make sure his shirts were tucked in properly, and he caught casual glimpses of himself when he passed by, or spoke with Crystal and the others, but that was about it. He knew what he looked like, and didn't feel the need to spend vast amounts of time gazing in the mirror. He was the same as he'd always been...or so he'd thought. It was different somehow now that he was standing there practically au natural.

Straightening, Harry raised an eyebrow, and regarded his reflection with a critical eye. His first thought when he really looked at himself, was Crystal and the others must be having him on again, but no, it really was him in there.

Wow.

Evidently the regular meals, combined with all the hours he'd spent lifting and hauling and shelving and scrubbing were paying off in ways other than Galleons and store credit. He was still slim, but no longer so painfully skinny, the adjective tall would be pushing it, but he seemed to be approaching at least "average" height, and as an added bonus, he had developed a thin layer of wiry muscle.

Thinking back to the accident, things made a bit more sense. Mrs. Fillmore had been outdoors, explaining the mistake to the delivery wizards, and giving them directions. Harry, who had been tending the Apothecary garden, caught snatches of their conversation but hadn't really paid much attention until the voices became louder and frightened.

Watch out!

It's slipping!

Catch it!

I can't hold it!

The delivery wizards had about six vats with them, with some kind of hovering charms on them. Harry didn't see what caused it, but by the time he poked his head around the building to see what the row was about, the vats were teetering precariously, and the whole lot was trying to spill in the street.

Mrs. Fillmore and the two delivery wizards managed to get five of the six under control, but the last one was still threatening to topple over. Realizing they'd never manage to catch it in time, he'd rushed over to help, catching the lip of the massive vat, and yanking back with all his might. The container had been quite large, and he'd reckoned he'd need his full body weight just to check its forward progress, never mind right it.

Unfortunately, he'd been doing all these mental calculations based on what his size had been this time last year. He wasn't a behemoth by any stretch of the imagination, and probably wouldn't be challenging Draco Malfoy's hefty friend Gregory Goyle to a wrestling match anytime soon, but, he had experienced some rather pronounced changes in height, strength, and body mass recently. Changes that had taken him by surprise.

Instead of just barely being able to budge it, he'd been pulled off balance when the thing hadn't been as heavy as he'd thought it should be. He'd landed hard on his rump and about half of the solution had spilled on him before one of the delivery wizards could rush over and heave it upright.

Harry blew out a disgusted breath and rolled his eyes. Some of the other scents wouldn't have been so bad. Wintergreen. Pine Forest.

Heck, even Citrus would have been okay, but noooo. He had to get Tea Rose!

Life stinks sometimes, Harry thought a little ironically, noting with distaste that he still smelled faintly of flowers. Perfect. All he needed now was for some halfwit to hang another nickname on him. "Sparky" he could live with. Something like "Rosy" or "Pinky" was completely out of the question. Too bad he couldn't hide in his room for the rest of the day.

This other, though...this was a bit of all right. Grinning like a kid with a new toy, Harry turned this way and that, studying the new sleekness in his form with frank amazement. An amused hoot drew his eye over to Patches and Hedwig for a minute. If either of them could speak, he suspected both of them would be laughing themselves silly, right about now, but he didn't care!

It had always seemed so horribly hopeless. So dismally unfair. He'd reckoned he was doomed to be ugly, skinny, undergrown, and physically deficient in general for the rest of his life--however long it might be. It hadn't been so bad first year, but the developmental differences between Harry and his year-mates (to Harry, anyway) seemed to become more and more pronounced as time went on. Now, though...

Hmmm. Maybe there was hope after all. He'd probably never have Ron's height, but he might catch Fred and George...or Ginny...or Pigwidgeon. At least he was taller than Peter Pettigrew now--not that that was saying a whole lot, mind.

Thinking of the Weasley's reminded Harry of the Burrow. He'd thought he might die of terminal embarrassment last summer when Mrs. Weasley had somehow noticed or guessed that he was dissatisfied with his appearance. Perhaps she hadn't just been being kind when she'd given him a little hug and discretely assured him he was merely a "late bloomer." Giving in to silliness, he made sure his towel was secure, and tried a couple of muscleman poses before realizing what he was doing, and slapping himself on the forehead.

Let's not get carried away, there, Potter! he chided himself, as he fetched some fresh clothes and hastily scrambled into them. It's a definite improvement, but you still have a way to go. Besides, if you don't watch yourself, you'll wind up like that conceited prat Lockhart! he thought with a little shudder, as he hid his scar under a fresh headband, and prepared to go back downstairs.

Saturday, July 22, 1995

This...

makes...

no...

bloody...

sense!

Nathaniel Baker shook his head in exasperation, and glared at his wand which was pointing inexorably out to sea. Canceling the spell, he walked a few paces, then tried again.

"Point me, Harry Potter!" he commanded, only to growl in frustration a few seconds later when his wand jerked around, then resumed its previous position.

"What the bloody hell is going on here?" the sandy-haired wizard demanded of no one in particular, as he watched the restless waves of Cottesloe Beach.

"All right, mate. Let's take it from the top," Nate muttered, pacing and tapping his wand against his other hand as he did when he was thinking, angry or nervous. Or all three, come to think of it. "You must have missed something somewhere."

Dumbledore had contacted him a few days ago, and requested his assistance in locating and retrieving one Harry Potter. He'd agreed readily to help in any way he could, even when he'd been warned him

about the Dursleys' aversion to magic. Albus had given him the name of Vernon Dursley's place of work, and requested he refrain from using magic as much as possible. That had seemed a bit silly to Nate, but again he had agreed.

It had taken a bit of doing to find Potter's muggle relatives, since they'd just relocated, and were still getting settled in, but he'd managed without too much drama. The name of Vernon Dursley's place of work had been a good start. From there it had just been a matter of talking to the right people and asking the right questions. When he'd strolled up the walk and knocked on the door of the Dursleys' new home, he'd reckoned he'd have young Mr. Potter's wayward bum back at Hogwarts before supper.

Served him right for thinking. Naturally it couldn't be that easy.

Petunia Dursley had been polite enough at first, but when he'd identified himself as a wizard, and mentioned the lad by name, she'd gotten awfully pale and nervous. She'd recovered quickly, though, and told him that Potter, and her own son Dudley, hadn't returned home from school yet, and she wasn't exactly sure when to expect them.

When he'd asked if he could wait, she'd refused, becoming evasive and panicky again, before refusing a bit ungraciously, and claiming she and the boys really had too much to do, when they returned. About half convinced that the woman was in serious need of professional help, Nate had left, planning to try again later. In the meantime, he decided to try his luck with the uncle.

Mindful of Petunia Dursley's reaction when she'd found out he was a wizard, Nate had decided to try another approach when confronting Vernon. He'd obtained some official-looking documents, and visited Vernon in his office, pretending there was some small problem with the Potter's immigration paperwork. His aim had been to draw Dursley into a friendly conversation, then casually bring up the fact that Potter was wanted at Hogwarts.

He'd never gotten the chance.

Vernon Dursley, like his wife, had grown extremely nervous and evasive when Potter had been brought up, but his story hadn't even begun to match hers. According to Vernon, Harry was a juvenile delinquent who used to attend St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. Dursley claimed the boy was still incarcerated there, and now that he and his wife were settled, they had been working on finding a local institution for Potter to be shipped off to. They had narrowed it down to two or three, and would be sending for the boy any time now.

Concerned, now, Nathaniel had said his goodbyes, and apparated back to the neat little house in the suburbs. It didn't take a genius to figure out something was rotten here. The uncle's story couldn't possibly be correct. Harry Potter attended Hogwarts, not some institution for incorrigible reprobates. Besides, Petunia Dursley had said he was enrolled in one of the local schools with her son.

Were they trying to hide Potter? Protect him from dark wizards? Or could it be something else?

Scowling, he had stalked up the walk, determined to get the whole truth out of Potter's aunt even if he had to hex her into next week. He'd just raised his fist to pound on the door when voices inside made him pause.

"But mum, I hate it here!" whined a boy's voice. "I'm supposed to be on holiday, and the kids are mean! Harry was always the one they teased back home!"

"There, there, popkin," Petunia Dursley's voice soothed. "They just need to get to know you, that's all. Here. Why don't you watch the telly for a bit before Dad get's home. I'll make you a nice snack."

"They don't show any of my favorite programs here," the boy grumbled sulkily, but Nate soon heard the telly come on just the same. Frowning, he listened for other voices in the house, but there didn't appear to be any. Shrugging, he knocked on the door.

"Dudley dearest, could you get that for Mummy?" Petunia's voice sounded a little farther away. Nate reckoned she must still be in the kitchen.

"I'm busy. Make Harry do it," the boy snapped testily. Nate raised an eyebrow. This lad was in need of a serious attitude adjustment. Petunia said something he couldn't make out, but evidently she convinced the boy, because a few seconds later he heard, "All right, all right," and the sound of approaching footsteps. A few seconds later, the door opened, and he found himself facing a rather large blonde boy.

"G'day," he'd greeted, striving to keep a civil face on the meeting. "I'm here to collect Harry Potter for Albus Dumbledore. Could you please fetch him for me?"

The boy had gaped unbecomingly, then turned a nasty shade of green. "Mum!" he squalled, turning toward the kitchen. "Muuuuuum!"

Petunia had peeked around the corner to see what the matter was. When she'd spotted Nate, she'd come flying out of the kitchen, chopping knife in hand, and positioned herself between the wizard and her son.

"I see the boys are home from school now," he'd commented, trying to salvage the situation.

"But Harry's not here!" Dudley had exclaimed in confusion, looking rather ridiculous as he cowered behind his bony mother.

Shocked, Nathaniel started to question the boy further, but Petunia had swiftly silenced her son by whacking him in the shin with her heel.

After glaring at Nate for a few seconds, Petunia lost her composure completely. "That's right! He isn't here! He...he...ran away! Took his magical rubbish and left! Always was a disgusting little troublemaker! Disappears without so much as a by your leave, and turns up again like a bad penny, expecting us to forgive everything and open our home to him again!"

She'd carried on a while longer, shrieking about how Potter was shamelessly endangering her family before ordering him away, and slamming the door in his face. Shaken by the encounter, Baker had immediately jumped into action. He called in some favors from some of his mates, and between them they'd tracked down some interesting facts. It didn't feel like he was any closer to discovering where Harry Potter was, but he did have an alarmingly long list of places where he wasn't:

He wasn't enrolled in any of the Australian magical or muggle schools.

He wasn't enrolled at St. Brutus's.

He hadn't been admitted to any of the area hospitals.

The local police had never heard of him.

He wasn't in any of the runaway shelters, foster care facilities, or juvenile detention centers.

And no one they questioned seemed to be able to recall seeing anyone fitting his description, either with the Dursleys or alone.

Afraid Petunia Dursley might have been telling the truth, and Harry was somehow surviving on the streets, Nathaniel had cast a tracking charm. The boy couldn't have gotten very far, weighted down with his belongings, and on foot. He'd apparated back to the Dursley's neighborhood, and let the charm lead him from the suburbs to Perth proper, and finally here to Cottesloe Beach.

At any time during his citywide trek, he'd expected to find a frightened, cold, and hungry young wizard, who'd had ample time to regret his foolishness.

Provided he'd buggered off of his own accord, of course.

Baker couldn't say he'd blame the boy, even if he had, but another possibility that was completely believable, was that Potter's aunt and uncle had simply tossed him out. Their unconcerned attitude with

regard to their nephew's welfare, and their lying to cover up was nothing short of appalling.

As he'd walked, he'd worked through what he'd say. He reckoned Potter would have to be approached carefully. The last thing Nate wanted to do was frighten him off. He had time to compose several good opening lines and scenarios, but the kid hadn't turned up.

The kid hadn't turned up, and he'd reached land's end.

If he walked another few meters he'd be ankle deep in seawater, and yet his wand continued to pull steadily Northwest.

Nate stopped pacing and looked out to the horizon with dawning horror. Harry Potter wasn't in Australia.

But his relatives were. And he was willing to lay odds that they were lying about his whereabouts, and what they knew.

It's time to call in reinforcements, Nate thought darkly as he raised his wand and apparated home.

Chapter 20 - Knock, Knock

Saturday, July 22, 1995

"Albus!"

"Albus!"

"Albus Dumbledore!"

"What?" the Hogwarts Headmaster blinked in surprise, startled out of the bleary doze he'd fallen into. He hadn't slept well the past few nights, and it was beginning to catch up with him. The first thing he noticed as he glanced around his office was Fawkes had returned from where ever he'd gone. The second was that Nathaniel Baker's head was floating in his fireplace. He smiled at the firebird, and gave him a little pat of welcome as he rose from his chair and started across the room.

"Albus!" Nate's head called again, before he spotted Dumbledore hurrying toward the fireplace. "About bloody time," he scolded in an uncharacteristically harsh voice. "We've got trouble, mate, big trouble!"

"What sort of trouble, Nathaniel?" Dumbledore asked warily, his smile of welcome fading rapidly in the face of the other wizard's curt demeanor.

"I've tracked down the Potter boy's muggle relatives--" Nate began, before the professor cut him off.

"Harry's all right, isn't he?" Albus interrupted anxiously, the conversation he'd had a few days ago with Sirius, Remus, Arthur, and Arabella coming instantly to mind. "They didn't harm him, did they?"

"I don't know what the kid's condition is, mate," Baker said regretfully.

Dumbledore frowned in confusion. "But you said you'd located his muggle relatives!"

The Australian wizard's eyes hardened. "Oh, I found them all right," he snarled contemptuously. "Buncha useless bastards, the lot of 'em!"

Dumbledore felt his stomach drop as the implications sank in. Had Harry run away again? What was the boy thinking? Why hadn't he written to someone? "Are you saying Harry isn't with the Dursleys?" he croaked with a mouth suddenly gone dry. Please, oh please say I misunderstood you... he thought wildly. I cannot believe this is happening!

Nate nodded, however, dashing the old man's hopes. He watched sympathetically as Albus moved to an armchair by the fireplace and stiffly sat in it. "That's about the size of it," he elaborated when the headmaster was settled. "And as near as I can tell, he isn't in Australia, either," he announced after a brief pause.

What??! No! Dumbledore sat gobsmacked for a full fifteen seconds before recovering his senses. "WHAT??!" he finally roared aloud, making Nate's head flinch back from him. "When did he leave? How did he get out of the country? Do you have any idea where he went?"

"Albus, we don't have any indication that he was ever down here to begin with."

The old headmaster rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming on. NO!! This couldn't be right! He had it all worked out, and this wasn't part of the plan at all! Harry was supposed to be retrieved from the Dursleys, reprimanded for withholding such important information, then duly forgiven and trundled off to the Burrow for the rest of the holiday. It had all seemed so cut and dried, Dumbledore had moved on to the next step, and had been working through the knotty legal problems that would surely come up next summer. Because of the protective magic involved, assigning Harry a new legal guardian, and removing him from the Dursley's care would not be easy.

Realizing the younger wizard was studying him with concern, he took a deep breath and nodded reassuringly. "Please begin at the beginning, Nathaniel," he requested, willing himself to be calm and clear-headed.

So Nate relayed his activities over the last few days. He touched on his search for the Dursleys, and his initial contact with Petunia and Vernon. He told of the elder Dursley's conflicting stories, and what their wuss of a son had unwittingly revealed. By the time he'd gotten to his second visit with Petunia Dursley, the sandy-haired wizard was almost choking with indignation.

"That aunt of his is an absolute loonie. Has a few kangaroos loose in the top paddock, if you know what I mean. Gave me an earbashing like you wouldn't believe about Potter and how horrible he is, and how he had intentionally put her family in danger..." Baker broke off and shook his head, then met Dumbledore's gaze again. "Like she can talk about horrible kids--have you met that worthless brat of hers?"

Albus nodded grimly, and listened as Nate got back on track, and described his growing suspicions, and how he'd followed a locator charm from the Dursley's neighborhood to the ocean with no success. "Have you been back to the Dursley's home?"

"Nah, not yet," Baker said, shaking his head. "I apparated straight home from the beach, and reckoned I'd give you firecall first."

"Good. Can you arrange to have the Dursleys put under surveillance?"

"I can bloody well do better than that! I was thinking of taking some of me mates over and giving them some wall-to-wall counseling."

Dumbledore chuckled in spite of himself. "Just make sure they don't try to run. We'll need to find young Mr. Potter before any charges can be made."

"Maybe not, mate. I can't prove anything just yet, but I reckon the uncle's hiding something. He got awfully nervous when Potter's name came up, yabbering on about how they were planning to send for the boy as soon as they'd found themselves a proper little prison." Nathaniel made a face of patent disgust. "I don't know how that kid

isn't loonie himself if he'd had to live with them all his life. If he got away, and can manage without, I say good on him!"

Dumbledore sighed. It wasn't quite that simple. Legalities aside, the protection Harry's blood relations gave him was powerful magic, and not to be dismissed lightly, especially now that Voldemort had returned. On the other hand, Harry was no longer the helpless toddler he had been when Lily and James had been murdered, and given the recent information that had come to light...

"Just watch them for now, Nate. I want them where I can find them once we locate Harry. That might prove difficult if they're fleeing in terror."

"No worries, mate. I'll let you know if anything interesting happens," Baker grinned as he waved and winked out.

For several long seconds after the firecall ended, Dumbledore sat stunned in his chair by the hearth trying to process what he'd just learned and corral his whirling thoughts. Harry wasn't with the Dursleys! He couldn't believe it! Harry wasn't with the Dursleys? It was incomprehensible. If he wasn't with the Dursleys...

And he wasn't with the Weasleys...

Or Sirius...

Then where in the bloody blue blazes was he??! Why hadn't he contacted anyone?

With an unaccustomed and very unwelcome feeling of panic, the old headmaster realized he had no idea where Harry was, or who he was staying with (if anyone), or how he was getting by... The only thing he knew for a fact was Harry must be managing somehow. He sounded perfectly fine in his letters, and--

His letters!

With a burst of speed that surprised even himself, Dumbledore leapt out of the chair, and almost ran back to his desk, startling Fawkes as

he did so. The red and gold bird ruffled his feathers in defense, and trilled unhappily, drawing the headmaster's attention.

"You delivered the package to Harry!" Albus said, this fact suddenly occurring to him. "Where is he?" the headmaster almost demanded, whirling around to face the phoenix. "And for that matter where the devil have you been?"

The firebird seemed to shrug, and adopt an alarmingly human "oh, here and there" attitude. He trilled an amused-sounding note, almost seeming to laugh at the old wizard's agitation.

Knowing from experience that he wouldn't get anything out of Fawkes just yet, Dumbledore threw him a reproving look, then riffled through the correspondence on his desk until he located the file containing Harry's letters. Carefully arranging them in chronological order, he glanced over the parchment again, trying to read between the lines, and look for any subconscious clues Harry might have given.

There was precious little to work with. Harry spent most of his time dutifully passing along what he'd managed to learn from his link with Voldemort. He mentioned himself very little, and his muggle family even less. There was a reference in his first letter, dated July 6:

...Sorry to disturb you, but a couple of things have happened that I thought you might like to know. The first thing is, I have a summer job. I know you wanted me to keep close to Privet Drive, but my relatives didn't exactly give me a choice...

And a brief mention in the letter dated July 15th:

I guess that's all I have to report sir, I hope you find the information useful. Oh, and one other thing...my aunt and uncle have sold their property on Privet Drive. The house is currently vacant. If Voldemort is planning to attack me there, I'm afraid he'll be disappointed.

Dumbledore scowled at the letter dated the 6th. When he'd received it, he'd been too distracted by Harry's news about his scar to properly notice that first bit. Even later, he'd taken it to mean Vernon and

Petunia Dursley had insisted that Harry get a part time job. He'd even theorized that Vernon might have arranged for one at Grunnings.

My relatives didn't exactly give me a choice...

There was something about that wording that Albus didn't like. Normally, a teenaged boy would say "they made me" or something to that effect if a parent or guardian sat them down and said, "Now we've decided you'll be getting a job this summer, no arguments!" He could be wrong, but there seemed to be a subtle difference in what Harry wrote. It implied he had been forced to make the best of a situation based on his relatives' actions. Did Harry learn the Dursleys were relocating and refuse to accompany them? Did they perhaps inform him that he would not be coming along, thereby forcing Harry to find the means to support himself?

And if the latter case was true, why hadn't Harry told anyone? For that matter, why had he mentioned these specific facts, and these alone? If he knew one thing about Harry Potter, it was he usually had a reason for his actions. When he'd questioned him about the Sorcerer's Stone, the Chamber of Secrets, Sirius Black, and most recently the TriWizard Tournament, he'd been struck by the boy's ability to think on his feet, and the way he could almost instinctively determine his next course of action.

Of course there had been a certain amount of luck and assistance in his successes as well. Harry probably would not have been able to defeat all the spells and enchantments guarding the Sorcerer's Stone without his friends. He probably would not have done as well against the Basilisk if Fawkes had not blinded it first, and the unexpected Priori Incantatem effect had played a large part in his escape from Lord Voldemort just last month. One could argue that the boy was simply exceptionally lucky--as Severus often did--but there was more to it.

One of Harry's greatest strengths was his ability to improvise and keep his wits about him in times of stress. He could immediately take advantage of unexpected assistance or distraction, and act while his opposition was still trying to work out what to do next. It was a powerful gift--one that would probably serve him well later in life.

Provided he lived past his fifteenth birthday, of course. Dumbledore examined the facts he knew from every angle he could think of, but still couldn't find a reasonable explanation for Harry's behavior. What is that boy thinking?!

Clamping down on his annoyance, Dumbledore reached for his enchanted parchment. This wasn't business he had to share with the entire Order, but it was obvious the search needed to be redirected. If the Fates were kind, Harry was still in Britain. He didn't even want to consider the nightmare scenario of trying to find young Potter as he made his way back from Australia by broomstick.

The team he had to trust with this was obvious. Sirius, Remus, Arthur, Arabella, and Severus already knew Harry wasn't where he was supposed to be, so there was no additional risk. Well, perhaps a little risk, Albus thought, with a grimace, as he imagined Sirius' reaction to the news. He didn't need Sybil Trelawney, the Hogwarts Divination professor, to tell him that Harry's godfather would not be pleased with this new turn of events, and Albus could not blame him. He hadn't blundered this badly in years.

With a heavy sigh, he took his quill, and scratched out a brief note, asking the group to please come to his office about the time Arthur was due to finish work for the day. As an afterthought, he asked them to bring any correspondence Harry might have sent them, then sent the message. Leaning back in his chair, he settled back to await their responses, then his eyes fell on his stack of parchment again.

Of course!

Wondering how on earth he could have been so blind, Dumbledore picked up his quill again, and sent another short note:

Harry,

I need to speak with you. Please respond on this parchment.

Professor Dumbledore

Lancasters, Harry decided, as he put out a shipment of kitchen products, wasn't all that different from the other stores he helped out in. It was larger--more of a department store, really--with a more varied inventory, but the jobs he'd been tasked with were the same as those he did on Diagon Alley. Cleaning, unpacking, and stocking were not activities that differed a great deal based on one's location.

The store itself had been something of a shock, Harry mused as he paused a moment to direct a witch and her two young sons to the public restrooms. He'd reckoned any shop on Knockturn Alley would be dank and gloomy, full of unspeakably horrid things, and equally questionable people, but Lancasters was actually quite nice. It was located a bit off the beaten path, had a pleasant atmosphere, and was absolutely nothing like the shops that catered solely to practitioners of the Dark Arts.

This turn of events had been a huge relief for Harry. He'd been a bit surprised to find Cassandra waiting for him when he'd returned to the dining room after his shower the day before. She'd been sitting nonchalantly at the bar, sipping a butterbeer, and had waved him over as soon as he'd come out of the kitchen. Tom had been assisting another customer, and by the time he'd hurried over to them, Cassie had already asked Harry if he would help out, making sure to emphasize how terribly shorthanded they were. Not seeing any reason to refuse, Harry had agreed to help out when he could, completely missing Tom's frantic attempt to catch his attention.

Twisting his mouth a little to one side, Harry frowned lightly when he recalled the innkeeper's reaction to this turn of events. Tom had not been happy. It was obvious he hadn't wanted Harry anywhere near Knockturn Alley, and that he thought Cassandra had tricked him into promising to help without presenting all the facts up front.

This was a nuance of wizarding society that Harry still fumbled with. Evidently some words and/or actions constituted a binding "contract" as it were, while others didn't. Just last year Harry had been forced to participate in the TriWizard Tournament when his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire. Harry had reckoned he would be dismissed as a competitor when Dumbledore learned a mistake had been made, and he, Harry hadn't put his name in the cup. Unfortunately, that

hadn't been the way things had worked out. It didn't matter who had "volunteered" him. His name had come out of the Goblet, so he had to participate. Period. Although his current situation was nowhere near as serious, Harry got the distinct impression that backing out or changing his mind now that he'd promised, would be seen by some as dishonorable.

Although he hated to admit it, Harry had experienced a little twinge of unease himself when Cassie had disclosed the location of the shop. He still recalled accidentally arriving at Borgin and Burkes the first time he'd attempted Floo travel. Yeah, his first experience with Knockturn Alley had been impressive all right, just not exactly in a favorable way.

Harry grimaced as he recalled the mistake. Borgin and Burkes had been (and probably still was) a right cheery place, with its bloodstained cards, human bones, cursed objects, and evil-looking masks. Harry, of course, had wasted no time getting out of there, but he hadn't liked it any better on Knockturn Alley itself. The street had somehow managed to be dark and creepy even in broad daylight, and the shops and passers by hadn't been any better. In fact, the first person he'd run across when he'd hurried out of the store had been an old witch selling what appeared to be whole human fingernails.

Bleagh! Harry shuddered a little, and unconsciously ran his index fingers over his thumbnails. If that was indeed what they were, he had absolutely no desire to know how or from where she had obtained them.

Fortunately for Harry, Rubeus Hagrid had come along about that time. The Hogwarts Gamekeeper had taken Harry in hand and directed him back to Diagon Alley where the Weasleys were frantically searching for him.

The boy snickered quietly to himself as he reached up to hang the last self-stirring spoon on a hook, then knelt down and started unpacking and shelving some bottles of Mrs. Skower's Magical Mess Remover. It was actually sort of funny that he had a bunch of garden pests to thank for his friend's timely arrival. Being a half-giant, Hagrid was big enough to look after himself of course, but Harry rather

doubted that Hagrid strolled down Knockturn Alley on a regular basis. No, the "sheer dumb luck" that Professor MacGonagall claimed he possessed in abundance had come to his rescue once again.

Grinning fondly at the thought of his friends, Harry let his gaze roam over Mr. Lancaster's wares while he continued to re-stock the shelves. He had already identified several potential Christmas presents for Mrs. Weasley, and was itching to get to the Burrow so he could casually poke around her kitchen and see if she already owned them. Dr. Granger and Janet might like some of these things too, come to think of it, but Harry wasn't sure if he was allowed to introduce magical merchandise into muggle households. The Grangers would probably be all right, but Harry didn't know what the rules were when dealing with magical children who were as yet unknown to their parents. He wondered if he could inform the Wrights, or if the common practice was to wait until the muggleborn child was invited to attend magical school. Perhaps he could ask Tom later.

Tom.

Sighing a bit, Harry continued to recall the "discussion" between Cassandra, Tom, and himself the day before at the Leaky Cauldron.

Since his first visit had been so appalling, Harry hadn't been too keen on going to Knockturn Alley again. Tom had noticed his hesitation, and backed him up at once, saying he shouldn't be obligated to go anywhere he felt uncomfortable. Harry, however, felt bad about going back on his word. He had agreed to help, after all, and from the sound of things, they were really shorthanded.

He'd floundered a bit, not exactly knowing how to proceed until Cassandra had taken pity on him and compromised. Since he'd come back to the Leaky Cauldron early because of the Tea Rose mishap, he had some time to kill before supper. She'd offered to take him to the store, introduce him to Mr. Lancaster, and show him around, promising if he felt even the tiniest bit unsure, he could Floo straight back to the Leaky Cauldron, no questions asked.

Therein lay the root of his problem with Tom. It had been an easy out. Tom had obviously expected Harry to make his duty trip to

Lancasters, then take full advantage of it. When Harry and Cassie had returned, and he'd learned Harry had essentially wasted an opportunity to gracefully back out, Tom had gotten very red in the face, looking disturbingly like Uncle Vernon in point of fact. Harry had defended his decision, though. He truthfully hadn't been unsure or uncomfortable in Lancasters--quite the opposite in fact--and despite what the Ministry of Magic and his muggle relatives claimed, Harry wasn't a habitual liar. He'd told a few falsehoods in the past when he'd sensed it would be prudent to do so, but that sort of caution just hadn't seemed to be necessary in this case.

Martin Lancaster had welcomed Harry to his shop, then had begun showing him around and working very hard at putting him at ease. He was a stout, middle aged wizard with grizzled brown hair, but his most arresting feature was his mismatched eyes. Harry had experienced a little jolt of shock when he'd realized Mr. Lancaster had one brown eye, and one blue. By the time they'd finished a brief tour of the store, during which time the shopkeeper had explained to Harry what would be expected of him, the young wizard had relaxed significantly, and hadn't had any qualms about helping out from time to time.

Unfortunately, Tom did. Harry could have kicked himself for not cottoning on to this fact sooner, but it was too late now. He suspected the elder wizard had wanted to shout any number of uncomplimentary things when Harry had returned with Cass, and he'd been informed of this new state of affairs, but amazingly Tom hadn't said a word. Instead, he'd closed his mouth so hard his teeth clicked, motioned for Harry to watch the pub and main dining area, then disappeared into his own rooms for a few minutes.

Harry shook his head and smiled softly as he recalled the scene. Cassandra, also taken aback by Tom's rather violent reaction, had been good enough to stay a bit. The pair of them, both fearing they'd lost the older wizard's good opinion forever, had waited with identical hangdog expressions for Tom to return.

While he didn't altogether approve of Cassie's tactics, Harry found he couldn't immediately condemn them as unnecessary either. She'd been touchingly contrite and apologized after Tom left. She'd been

afraid that Harry would dismiss her out of hand if she couldn't show him Lancasters first, and Harry couldn't say with absolute certainty that her fears were unjustified. Yes, she'd connived a bit to get an extra pair of hands for the shop, but she truly hadn't intended to get him into trouble.

Tom still hadn't been quite himself when he returned, but the scene that followed had been much milder than Harry expected. Calmer now, the innkeeper had stiffly stated his disapproval of Cassandra and Harry's actions, then immediately started working on damage control. He'd insisted on "getting permission from the parent or guardian," which Harry found a bit rich, but he'd managed to keep a straight face. Next, Tom had set about making a few rules that he thought might "smooth the way" and "help reassure the family if they were reluctant." Harry, for example, was to Floo directly to and from Lancasters with no stops along the way, and if he absolutely had to travel on foot, he would be escorted by at least one competent witch or wizard. Since Harry would be in a more questionable part of town, Cassandra had not suspected subterfuge, and agreed readily. She'd even promised to escort Sparky herself.

This had been an altogether new experience for Harry. He'd frowned and grumbled a bit at the restrictions, claiming he was perfectly capable of looking after himself, thanks, but deep down, he'd been secretly relieved. Tom's limits were common sense, really, and not unreasonable, times being what they were. It had been an interesting contrast to the Dursleys. They had always been rather excessive with their punishments, and the rules they imposed were designed to keep him isolated and downtrodden. They'd never been overly concerned about his safety.

Harry finished emptying the first box of Mrs. Skower's, and reached for another. He had understood, and was truly touched by Tom's concern, he couldn't help but think that the old innkeeper was being a bit overcautious. He'd managed to successfully navigate the Floo System this time, and the only problem that had come up wasn't completely unexpected. Almost as soon as he'd arrived, an aged wizard in shocking purple robes had glimpsed his untidy black hair and blurted, "It can't be!" making Harry cringe reflexively as heads turned his way. Looking back, he'd almost felt sorry for the little

wizard who thought he'd spotted Harry Potter. The poor old chap had rushed excitedly over to greet him, but when he'd caught sight of Harry's glasses-less face and brown contact lenses he'd practically wilted with disappointment.

As a general rule Harry thought being spotted in public was a ruddy nuisance, even when he wasn't going incognito, but it was really hard to be impatient with the witches and wizards who were so genuinely delighted to see him. They were far easier to tolerate than opportunists like Gilderoy Lockhart and Rita Skeeter, and the members of the wizarding public who acted as though they expected him to sprout a halo or horns at any given second.

He'd forgiven the purple-robed wizard's "mistake," of course, brushing it off like it happened all the time. Actually, when he'd started working days on Diagon Alley, it had. He'd nearly panicked the first time he'd been spotted, but mercifully, the witch who'd seen him had lost interest quickly when she'd noted his eyecolor and the rather menial work he was engaged in.

He'd gradually grown more used to it as the days passed. There was a certain rhythm to the encounters. Most of the time he was spotted from the back, or else he had his head down while working on something. Either way, he typically had time to school his features into a look of puzzled curiosity before facing whoever had spoken. Normally, it didn't take long for them to conclude that they'd been mistaken, apologize for troubling him, and go on about their business. Most of the time, he wasn't required to speak at all.

It was happening a little less frequently now, at least on Diagon Alley. Messy black hair was slowly beginning to imply Jim Patterson, rather than Harry Potter. Customers who came to the Alley only occasionally were still taken by surprise when they saw him, but more often than not, they were being intercepted and set straight by those "in the know" before they could approach him and embarrass themselves. Besides, any witch or wizard worth their salt knew it was rather early in the summer for the Boy Who Lived to be about. He typically visited Diagon Alley but once a year in order to purchase his school supplies. The rest of the year he was either at Hogwarts, or safely hidden away in the Muggle World.

No, the only thing Harry had to deal with on a regular basis was conversations. Customers, he noticed, tended to dismiss clerks and stockboys as part of the furniture, and not many of them bothered to lower their voices or try to keep their words private. Since everyone had an opinion on the Boy Who Lived, Harry had gotten quite an earful over the last few weeks.

If he was lucky, the shoppers would chatter about something innocuous, such as how Sparky/Jim Patterson reminded them of Harry Potter, or something nice like how the Daily Prophet was nothing but a filthy tabloid, and all its articles were rubbish. He'd once had reason to wonder if one's face could explode from too much blood rushing to it when two teenaged witches had noticed him (as Jim), and begun to speculate in giggly whispers about whether or not he qualified as the "sexiest beast alive."

If he wasn't so lucky, the conversations would take a darker tone. Harry found he didn't actually have to read the Daily Prophet in order to know what was being written about him. Shoppers who believed whatever was published would sigh about "that Potter boy's mental state" like he'd already been admitted to St. Mungo's for life, or else they would accuse Harry Potter of being a disappointment, a liar, a joke, or an attention-seeking glory hound.

It was annoying and discouraging, and made Harry yearn to stomp over to the gossiping busybodies, rip off his headband, and yell at them to shut up about things they knew nothing about. He couldn't, of course, but oh, how he wanted to! Thankfully, it never lasted long. The speakers would typically switch topics after a few minutes, or else they would continue on their way, taking their conversation out of earshot.

Funniest by far, were the self-proclaimed "Potter Spotters" who made it their hobby to catch a glimpse of the Boy Who Lived on Diagon Alley, and Hogsmeade Weekends. Since they usually kept their distance, and didn't call attention to Harry or try to interact with him, they didn't seem to care if the object of their fixation was "disturbed and dangerous" or perfectly normal. Harry had listened with mixed amusement and alarm as the witches and wizards engaging in this

activity compared notes about his movements and habits like he was some kind of rare migratory bird. Some of them missed the mark completely, but others were dangerously accurate. He wondered if that was something he should call to Professor Dumbledore's attention, but wasn't sure how to do so without revealing his location.

His rambling musings were suddenly cut short when he heard brisk footsteps and an exaggerated gasp behind him. The identity of the newcomers was soon apparent when a familiar female voice gushed, "Cor Blimey! That's Harry Potter that is! How long's Harry Potter been working for you Marty?" Harry put the last bottle in its place, then sat back on his heels and twisted around to look at Cassandra and Mr. Lancaster over his shoulder.

Harry rolled his eyes at Cassie as she gave him a teasing wink. "I hate that," he muttered, lightly reproving the blonde witch.

"I know," she replied, gray eyes sparkling with mirth. "Sorry, I shouldn't tease, but you really do favor that Potter kid from the back."

"So I've been told," Harry replied dryly, accepting her outstretched hand and allowing her to haul him to his feet.

"It's that hair of yours, Sparky," Martin said with a grin. "Perhaps you should use some of your summer earnings to buy some hats. We have a lovely selection on aisle three you know."

Cassandra snorted beside him. "It really is a bit rich when you think on it," she remarked. "Do you know how many customers were thick enough to believe Harry Potter was doing something as common as stocking the shelves in this very store?"

Harry looked down and shrugged noncommentally.

Martin, in the meantime, was admiring the mostly-stocked aisle. "Well, I don't know about Harry Potter, laddie, but your work is certainly top notch!" he commented in his gravelly voice. "I was a little skeptical of the rumors--sounded a bit too good to be true--but this is well done! Very well done indeed!" He paused, then studied the boy with an

appraising eye. "Do you think Tom might let you stay a little later if I promise to feed you?"

"I'm afraid I can't this evening, Mr. Lancaster. I'm expected at a friend's house, and really should be getting back. Maybe another time?"

Lancaster nodded, "Of course, lad. I should have guessed you'd have plans. Can't blame me for trying, though, and I suppose it would be better for me to speak to Tom and your family beforehand, anyway." Rubbing his hands briskly together, he glanced up and down the aisle Harry was currently working with a professional eye. "It looks like you're at a good stopping place."

"Yes sir, all I need to do is clean up the empty boxes."

"Feh," Martin said, waving one hand dismissively, and reaching for his wand with the other. "Allow me," he grinned, as he shrunk the lot, then summoned and pocketed them. "I'm just delighted to have the products on the shelves to sell." He turned to face Harry. "How did you want to settle up?"

"Store credit, please sir." Harry grinned as he considered the huge store. "I want to come back on my own time for a proper look 'round."

"Right-o," said Martin, summoning a ledger and making an entry in it. "I'd say you earned a good eight Galleons this afternoon. Well done! Come back as soon as you can."

"Thank you Mr. Lancaster, I will," Harry said, waving as the shopkeeper said his goodbyes and headed back to the front of the store.

"Ready to go then?" Cassie asked gesturing toward the fireplaces.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, then thought of something as they headed in that general direction. "Hey Cassie, have you ever done any child minding?"

The blonde witch shrugged. "A bit. I haven't in a while, though, unless you count me escorting you to and from the Leaky Cauldron," she teased, laughing at the exasperated look Harry threw her. "Why do you ask?"

"A friend of mine in muggle London asked me to watch her girls for a while this evening. She wants to pay me--won't take no for an answer--but I really don't know how much to ask. Do you mind telling me how much you charged?"

"It depended," Cassandra said thoughtfully, finally giving the question her full attention. "There were several factors: were they friends, how many kids there were, how much trouble they were, how much the family could afford..." Cassie trailed off with a suspicious look on her face. "I take it you've never done anything like this before?"

"Not really. I distracted them so their mother could do some chores a few nights ago, but I've never been alone with them."

"Well don't be surprised if they give you a rougher time of it tonight. They'll probably push you, to see how much you'll let them get away with since Mum won't be there to step in. Will you have to feed or bathe them?"

"No, their mum said she would take care of that. I'm just there to entertain them until bedtime, then sort of stand watch until the parents get back."

The witch shrugged again then began ticking points off on her fingers. "They're friends of yours, you like the kids, money isn't that much of an issue, and you shouldn't have to do loads extra work, correct?" She waited for Harry's nod, then asked, "How many are there?"

Harry held up two fingers. "One's ten, one's two."

"Is the little one still in nappies?" she asked, trying not to laugh out loud at the look of dawning horror that crossed Harry's face. At length he nodded, recalling how Janet mentioned she was planning to begin Becky's Toilet Training soon. Since Becky was physically ready, Jan had considered attempting it before they moved but decided in the

end to put it off until the family was settled again. "Well that's a bit of extra work, but it isn't all that bad," Cassie downplayed kindly. "It's just something you need to be aware of, and check every hour or so."

Harry grimaced. Suddenly the evening was looking a little less fun and a lot more complicated. "I'll manage, I suppose. Besides, its too late to back out now."

"I'd say one Galleon per hour for the two of them. That isn't too dear," Cassandra said after a minute, then looked at him as though sizing him up. "Look," she offered, taking note of his worried face, "I'm sure you'll be fine, but if you'll wait just a moment, I'll see if I can get you a little insurance."

"Okay," Harry said with a shrug, wondering what she had in mind. He watched curiously as she went over to where her boyfriend Silas Bowman was working. He was a striking young wizard in his early twenties with dark hair and dark eyes. Harry hadn't had a chance to speak to him, other than being introduced, but he seemed nice enough. He observed as the two of them conversed briefly, then Cass hurried back. "Here," she said, handing him a small, flat, rectangular something in a black leather sleeve. "We'll get it back from you tomorrow."

Harry raised a questioning eyebrow, as he eased the object out. It was just a plain mirror, about the size of his palm.

"It's charmed," Cassie explained, seeing his confusion. "Say my name, and watch the mirror."

Harry still didn't understand, but did as he was told. "Cassandra."

A second later Cassie's pocket twitched. Smiling, she reached in, and drew out a round compact. It was hinged in the middle, and flipped open to reveal two mirrors. When she looked into the top one, her face appeared in the rectangular mirror Harry held. "Hi!" she said, wagging her fingers at him.

"Excellent!" Harry exclaimed in delight, beaming at her. "But why did I have to use Silas' mirror?" he asked, obviously a little ill-at-ease about borrowing the other wizard's things.

"Well, I could lend you mind instead I suppose, but his mirror contacts mine and vice versa." Cassandra nodded in her boyfriend's direction as she draped a companionable arm around Harry's shoulders. "Silas is a good enough chap, but I'm afraid he's not very knowledgeable about nappies and night terrors," she whispered conspiratorially in his ear, making Harry snicker into his hand.

"That's better," she said approvingly, reaching for the Floo Powder. "Can't have you going back looking all scared like that. Tom would think we've been mistreating you or something."

"Thanks, Cassie," Harry grinned, suddenly feeling much more confident as he threw the Floo Powder into the fireplace. She was right. He might not want to deal with nappies, but they certainly weren't anything he couldn't handle. Heck, he'd done pretty well for himself most of the summer, Harry realized with a start as he fell out of the hearth at the Leaky Cauldron, waved to Tom, and headed to his room. He was grateful to Tom and the other merchants for giving him a chance, but he had been the one who'd had to prove himself. They hadn't been obligated to ask him to return.

It was actually beyond ironic that he had his dear Aunt Petunia and her ruddy insistence that things be perfect to thank for his success. He was used to working fast and hard, and he'd picked up any number of timesaving shortcuts while living on Privet Drive.

He was still feeling pleasantly chuffed as he entered his room, and greeted Hedwig. He wasn't due at Janet's for a while yet, so he headed to the desk, intending to start his weekly letter to Sirius and Remus while he had a little time. In retrospect, he should have known it was too good to last. All his warm, happy feelings turned to ice when his eyes fell on his enchanted parchment, and he recognized his headmaster's loopy handwriting on the top sheet.

Oh, bugger...

"WHAT??!" Sirius Black roared, practically launching himself across Dumbledore's desk. "You knew Harry wasn't in Australia hours ago, and you just see fit to tell us now??!"

"I sent Harry a message on the enchanted parchment, Sirius," Albus tried to explain, while Snape and Lupin grabbed Black by the arms and hauled him back. "I would have notified you had he responded earlier. As it is, he is out or hasn't noticed he has a message."

"Settle down, Sirius, before Snape casts Impedimenta on you," Remus hissed urgently in his friend's ear. "We suspected Harry wasn't in Australia days ago. We have facts and leads--we'll find him. Harry sounded fine in his last letter. Wherever he is, he's managing."

Sirius closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths before nodding and pulling his arms free. "What have you found out?" he growled in a barely civil tone, addressing Dumbledore.

Albus had just opened his mouth to answer when one of the stacks of parchment on his desk emitted the familiar ping that signaled an incoming message. The room couldn't have been silenced more effectively if the noise had been a gunshot. Almost as one, the group moved behind the Headmaster's desk so they could see the parchment.

Professor Dumbledore?

Sirius and Remus grinned manically when they recognized Harry's writing, and Dumbledore's eyes began to twinkle behind his half-moon glasses. "I believe we shall have our answers soon, Sirius," he remarked. Picking up his wand, he spelled the parchment to accept multiple messages, then picked up his quill and wrote: Harry! Where have you been? then tapped the new lightning bolt totem that adorned the top of his parchment along with all the others.

There was a pause, then Harry's rather uncertain reply swam up with another ping! At work. Is something wrong, sir?

Dumbledore sighed. There was no easy way to say this, so he chose the direct approach. Harry, we know you aren't in Australia with the Dursleys. Tell me where you are, and I'll have you brought to Hogwarts until all this can be sorted out.

Harry seemed to hesitate a long time before replying. When he did, his message wasn't satisfactory at all. Don't trouble yourself, sir. I'm all right where I am.

The assembled adults did a collective blink. Did he just refuse?

Perhaps you misunderstood, Harry. I am afraid this is not a request. Dumbledore's words, though kind, held an unmistakable hint of steel.

There was a little longer pause this time, but eventually Harry's message appeared. His words were still proper and polite, but the state of his writing spoke volumes about his current state of agitation. I appreciate your concern, sir, but unless something has changed since you spoke to me at Hogsmeade Station, I think it would be safer for everyone if I just stay where I am.

"Gimme that," Sirius snarled, snatching the quill out of Dumbledore's hand. Harry, this is Sirius! Stop messing around and tell us where you are at once!

Arthur Weasley grimaced, visualizing Harry's bright green eyes widening in shock, then narrowing in annoyance. Besides his work at the Ministry of Magic, Arthur had a rather large family. He'd learned over the years that threats and ultimatums were generally counterproductive with people in general, and adolescent boys in particular. Sirius and Albus were going at this all wrong. He glanced back to the parchment when it rang again.

Sirius? What are you doing there? Who else is there? Harry's quill strokes were quick and jerky now. Was he angry? Panicked? Excited? Relieved? It was impossible to tell for sure.

Sirius looked questioningly at the Headmaster, then began to list the room's occupants and receiving his nod of approval: Professor Dumbledore, me, Remus, Snape, Arthur Weasley, and Arabella Figg

are all here, he informed his godson, before resuming his fussing. Really Harry, how did you get into such a mess? I thought you were smarter than this! You should have contacted someone immediately!

Surprisingly, this time Harry's reply was calmer. Even a bit pacifying. I was going to Sirius, but I was lucky enough to get this job right away. It worked out, so I reckoned I shouldn't bother you. I know you're busy and all.

Oh, no, Arabella thought with dawning horror while Remus and Arthur looked on in shock and Sirius sputtered incoherently, He doesn't even realize he's the main thing we're protecting! That his safety is our paramount goal!

Sirius, meanwhile, was not so quiet about his feelings. Seizing the quill again, he began to fill the page with furious strokes. YOU SHOULDN'T BOTHER ME??? EXACTLY WHO IS THE GUARDIAN HERE??? YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO ASK IF YOU NEED HELP!! DON'T YOU KNOW YOUR SAFETY COMES FIRST?!

Professor Dumbledore said not to contact anyone unless it was an emergency! Harry retorted, as if that should explain everything.

Snape made an impatient noise in the back of his throat, and tried to take the quill from Sirius' shocked fingers, but Dumbledore beat him to it. Considering his words carefully, he wrote, And you do not believe your circumstances qualify, Harry?

No. Harry must have realized his answer was a trifle blunt, because after a few seconds he added Sir.

And what pray tell would you consider an emergency? Sirius had reclaimed the quill and his words were fairly dripping with sarcasm. Does Big bloody Ben have to fall on that thick head of yours?

There's no need to be so shirty. You were busy, and contrary to popular belief I'm not completely useless! Would it kill you to say "Well done, Harry?" It's like you're angry that I managed to look after myself instead of falling on my face or panicking like some stupid baby!

"Here, Sirius, let me try," Arthur said holding out a hand for the quill when it became obvious that Sirius was preparing to write something he'd probably live to regret. "Relax. He'll not say no to this," he grinned, certain that he held the trump card. When Black reluctantly surrendered the quill, and moved out of the way, Arthur stepped forward and wrote: Harry, this is Arthur Weasley. We don't have all the wards constructed around the Burrow, but the house is done. If you agree to stay in the house, you can come to the Burrow straightaway! You can even come tonight, if you'd like.

Harry paused for a long time. When he finally replied, his words were faintly regretful. Thanks Mr. Weasley. I'd like to make plans for a visit, but I really can't come tonight.

The look of shock on Arthur's face would have been comical if the situation hadn't been so serious. Harry was refusing to come to the Burrow? Hell must have frozen over. There was no other explanation.

Sirius took the quill back, but before he could think of something to say, Harry went on.

Sirius, everyone, I hate to be rude, but I need to go now. I have another job I need to take care of, and besides, I'm using all my parchment. I'm not going to have any left to tell you about Voldemort if we don't stop.

But you said you just returned from work, Sirius scribbled hastily. What the hell are you doing at this time of night?!

I'm moonlighting as a cat burglar, didn't I tell you?

Remus and Arabella glanced at each other, then looked warily at Sirius who seemed to be in danger of popping a blood vessel. Fortunately Harry didn't wait long before letting the other shoe drop. Seriously, I said I'd help a friend of mine out tonight. It's no big deal.

No one seemed to know what to say, so Harry continued. Look, I'm sorry I got short with you, but if I'd really needed help, I would have

asked for it. I'm all right, okay? Besides, if you haven't been able to find me, what chance does Lord Moldywarts have?

That's entirely beside the point, Harry! Sirius argued. This is a dangerous time for you! You need to be protected, not doing who knows what and living God knows where! Now for the last time, WHERE ARE YOU???

What will you do if I tell you? Harry flared again. Lock me in a cage? Send me back to the Dursleys? Put me in a bag and bury me? I...AM...FINE! Now, if you'll excuse me, the lady who requested my services this evening should be by any moment now, and I really need get going. Mr. Weasley, please tell everyone at the Burrow 'hi' for me. Professors, Mrs. Figg, Sirius, Remus, have a good evening.

"No! Wait!" Sirius yelled when he shook off his shock. Harry? HARRY!!!

"I think he left," Remus said unnecessarily a few minutes later when Harry didn't respond. "What now?"

Dumbledore had a odd look on his face when he answered, equal parts exasperation, embarrassment and oddly enough, pride. "Now, Mr. Lupin, we find him with all possible speed. Harry is safe enough for now, but that will change once Voldemort attacks his former residence, and discovers it is uninhabited."

Chapter 21 - For Every Action There Is An Equal And Opposite Reaction

The Census Library and Archive is a cluttered and rather nondescript office located deep within the Ministry of Magic. The witches and wizards employed there keep track of Britain's comparatively small magical population by maintaining records on wizarding births and deaths, witches and wizards immigrating into or out of Britain, and muggleborn children who have received and accepted invitations to study magic.

When a new member of wizarding society is made known to the Ministry of Magic a folder is created for them by the Census Librarians, and charmed to automatically update itself regarding matters of public record.

The file is started with a general information form which includes normal census data (name, address, legal guardian (if any) marital status, etc.) This form is typically completed and submitted with birth certificates, immigration papers, or muggleborns' letters of invitation/acceptance, and acts rather like a listing in a muggle telephone directory.

In early November 1981, the wizarding world as a collective whole was still reeling over the events of Halloween night.

While most magical folk were giddily celebrating their newfound freedom, select members of the Order of the Phoenix were in a mad scramble discussing wards, researching charms, and trying to decide how to best protect the tiny tousle-haired baby who was already being hailed as "The Boy Who Lived." They had to act, and act quickly.

While Harry Potter spent a few days under observation to make sure he hadn't suffered any lasting effects from his recent ordeal, his future had been decided. The Dark Lord had been driven from his body, and he seemed to be gone for good, but his followers were still on the loose and could pose a threat to the boy's safety.

By the time he'd been released with an astonishingly clean bill of health, a plan of action had been agreed upon, his guardians had been selected and an unprecedented amount of defensive magic had been put into place.

The Ministry ordered his records sealed, of course, for privacy and security reasons, but before the locking charm was cast, a lock of jet-black hair, bound by a strand of unicorn mane was slipped in. In so doing, Harry's file could be spelled to "watch" him, rather like an alarm system, and given a certain set of rules and parameters. If Harry was away from the main house for example, and his guardians did not know where he was, an alarm would sound, and a team of Aurors would be dispatched to find out what the matter was. If the Dursleys died, or the Blood Protection charm that Dumbledore cast was broken for any reason, then a more powerful fail-safe mechanism would be activated.

To their credit, the Ministry initially did a very good job of guarding Harry's file. The problem was how the charms themselves were set. Harry was a bright and curious child, and tended to "escape" at any given opportunity. More than once a squad of Aurors had apparated in, ready to leap to his defense, only to find the "victim" had merely wandered into the next-door neighbor's garden.

If they noticed Harry's reluctance to return to number four, or Petunia Dursley's tight-lipped glare when they arrived at her door, they chalked it up to simple exasperation. Judging by how often his folder rang, they imagined she fetched him back at least twice as often as they did.

Something had to be done, so a request had been submitted to have the charms modified. Unfortunately, unsealing Harry's folder or changing the magic on it required the permission of the minister himself, and the concurrence of the senior members of the Wizengamot, so help had not been quick in coming.

In desperation, a librarian had finally employed a stopgap measure. After Harry's folder had alerted twenty times in the past week alone, a silencing charm had been cast. The librarian responsible, had only intended to leave it until close of business, but had gotten busy and

forgotten. By the time the charms specialist came to investigate the matter, there didn't seem to be a problem to fix. So while Harry lived on Privet Drive, his folder shrilled to no avail:

When his arm was broken.

When Dudley and his gang bullied and punched him.

When the Dursleys withheld food and locked him away, first in the cupboard, then in Dudley's second bedroom.

And when the Weasley brothers essentially "kidnapped" him the summer before his second year.

Nothing, however, had been severe enough, or had lasted long enough to fully activate the failsafe mechanism, and trigger the defensive spells designed to hide young Harry Potter should the unthinkable happen...

...until now.

Saturday, July 22, 1995

(...Mr. Weasley, please tell everyone at the Burrow 'hi' for me. Professors, Mrs. Figg, Sirius, Remus have a good evening.)

Harry Potter scrawled his hasty farewell, threw his quill down in agitation, then stood and quite deliberately turned his back on the parchment on his desk. He couldn't deal with this. Not right now. He was confused and angry, and yes dammit, hurt! The need to distance himself--to just get away--was nearly overwhelming.

Feeling anxious he began to pace, trying to work off some nervous energy and corral his whirling thoughts. He hadn't been completely truthful to Sirius and the others just now. His impendent departure had just been a convenient excuse to cut the conversation short. Janet would be by soon, but he didn't have to dash out the door this split second.

Good thing, too, Harry thought ruefully, glimpsing himself in the mirror and wincing at his own soot-smeared and slightly wild-eyed appearance. He wasn't fit company for anyone at the moment, and it wasn't just because he needed to clean up. Janet might rethink the whole business and refuse to leave Kitty and Becky in his care if he met her in this state!

Yeah, and wouldn't that be ruddy brilliant, the teen thought with a resentful snort. Someone else in my life who thinks I'm useless and helpless and--

(Harry? HARRY!!)

Sirius... Harry stopped his restless pacing and sighed when he spotted his godfather's last attempt to gain his attention on what was left of his stack of enchanted parchment. He lightly touched the letters on the page, then scanned the pieces scattered on the desk feeling strangely divided. On one hand he was angry, and his pride was still smarting from the whole row. Sirius' scolding comments, even written, hurt like no dressing-down from the Dursleys ever had...

(How did you get into this mess?)

(You should have contacted someone at once!)

(I thought you were smarter than this!)

On the other hand, he was feeling ashamed and a little afraid. Sirius' good opinion was important to him, he realized, as was Remus' and Mr. Weasley's and Professor Dumbledore's. Had he managed to alienate the lot of them just now? Harry looked up and blinked his stinging eyes rapidly, before squeezing them tightly shut. No! He would not disgrace himself by crying on top of everything else! He thought not seeing the pages might help, but it didn't work. He could still remember what they said.

(Does Big bloody Ben have to fall on that thick head of yours?)

(This is a dangerous time for you! You need to be protected!)

(EXACTLY WHO IS THE GUARDIAN HERE??!)

More than once in the last few moments, Harry had been profoundly grateful that he hadn't been having this conversation in person. He opened his eyes, and scowled at sheets of parchment that formed an out-of-order, one-sided transcript on his desk. If they had gone at it much longer, he probably would've written "Shove off!" or something equally witty. He didn't imagine that would have gone over very well.

(Where have you been?)

(What the hell are you doing at this time of night?!)

(Stop messing around and tell us where you are!)

Harry made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat and wiped his hands down his face. Logically, he knew he shouldn't have cut them off the way he had, and furthermore, he reckoned he should probably pick up his quill, and apologize, but hang it all! It had been getting harder and harder to keep his responses civil. What about 'I am fine' was so hard to understand, anyway?

(This is a dangerous time for you!)

(You need to be protected!)

Shaking his head in annoyance, Harry leveled a glare at the parchment on the desk that should have incinerated it on the spot, before stalking into the bathroom to tidy up. Why were they all so upset anyway? Maybe he hadn't been able to follow Dumbledore's instructions to the letter, but he'd done the best he could, and he had kept his promise! Surely he should get a little credit for that! The way they were carrying on, anyone would think he'd been deliberately and willfully disobedient!

Without waiting for the water to warm, Harry caught a double-handful and splashed his face then shoved his head under the tap, and reached for the soap. What do they want from me anyway? he fumed indignantly. Hadn't he proven himself by now? If he could survive

Voldemort, a Basilisk, Professor Snape's Potions Class, and a huge crowd of Dementors, why did they think he couldn't handle himself now?

Irritated all over again, Harry rinsed off and snatched a towel off the shelf. His first night back from Hogwarts was something he avoided thinking about if he could. He'd been such a wreck, it was difficult to remember anyway. Besides being mentally and physically exhausted, he'd been soaked, half sick, and suffering from a mild case of shock.

Harry sighed again as he discarded his sooty clothes and pulled on some fresh ones. He was out of the way...safely tucked away for the summer. Wasn't that what they wanted? Diagon Alley, Privet Drive, what did it matter? He'd stayed at the Leaky Cauldron summer before Third Year, when they'd thought a mad killer was after him! What was different now?

Coming to the Alley wasn't anything he'd planned, or an action he could explain. It had just seemed to be the right thing to do at the time. Things had just worked out. When Tom had given him the means to support himself, the situation had lost a lot of its urgency. Once the crisis was over it hadn't seemed worth mentioning. The Order surely had more important matters to deal with than pointless might-have-beens.

Besides which, once he'd had time to catch his breath, his recent abandonment had slapped him in the face again. It might be a childish stance to take, but Harry found he wasn't keen on announcing he'd been tossed aside like a bit of old rubbish, and wanted to keep this fact to himself as long as possible. He'd immediately be in the wrong, of course. He imagined Dumbledore and the others would shake their heads and tut disapprovingly, and say 'What did you do this time, Harry?'

And if the Daily Prophet caught wind of it...

Harry flopped on the bed with a shudder, as sensationalized headlines danced in his head. With his luck, they'd make the Dursleys sound like bloody heroes for having had "the courage to reclaim their lives" or some such rot. MUGGLE RELATIVES OF THE

BOY WHO LIVED REVEAL ALL! Ooooooh, yes. The Dursleys wouldn't hesitate to burn him in effigy, and the Prophet would be so busy counting their Galleons, they probably wouldn't be bothered with petty details, like, say, abandonment being illegal.

Rolling over onto his back, Harry stretched his arms and flexed his shoulders, trying to work out the knots of tension in his neck and upper back. Well, at least one good thing had come from this mess. The whole scenario was so completely incomprehensible, he was still having trouble getting his mind around it, but if Dumbledore was correct, at least he knew where his relatives were now.

Bloody hell! Harry thought weakly, as he rubbed his eyes, and mentally revised a few theories he had with regard to his family's whereabouts. As far as he knew, his aunt and uncle had never even considered visiting Australia, and now they were living there? That bit of information had seemed so wildly out of character, so patently absurd, it had left him...well, stunned, really. Moreover, it certainly didn't tally with what he'd learned upon opening the box from Mrs. Figg's house!

And what a merry mess that has been, Harry thought, tossing an amused glance at the innocent-looking container by the dresser. The box had proved to be a bigger challenge than one might expect. There was no rhyme or reason to the jumbled mess inside, and to further confuse matters, Mrs. Figg must have cast enlarging and lightening charms on it.

Harry grinned, recalling how he had stumbled onto that bit of information. It had been the first night he'd worked with the box, back when he'd reckoned he'd have it unpacked and sorted in an hour--two at most. He'd reached in with both arms, intending to scoop everything out at once, and had sunk himself waist-deep in the stupid thing. He'd been so intent on finding the bottom of the box, he hadn't noticed it sizing itself to accommodate him. He was lucky he hadn't toppled in completely.

Because of the charms, it was impossible to tell just by looking how much the box contained. The contents were scattered and varied and spanned ten years or more. He'd removed at least three times more

than the box should have been able to hold, and there was still more to go! At this rate it was going to take the rest of the holiday just to decide what to keep, and what could be safely binned. He'd found legal records, photos, items from his muggle school, every Hogwarts letter that had ever been sent to Privet Drive, and loads of random rubbish: notes, lists, calendars, and such.

Oddly enough, it had been those pieces of scrap paper that had given him insight as to what the Dursleys had been planning, and where they might have gone. Harry snorted and rolled his eyes, visualizing all the notes and lists he'd unearthed. His aunt's obsessive planning had actually been useful for once.

One calendar, for example, showed that Aunt Petunia had originally had his entire holiday pretty well planned out. She'd typed up a schedule on the computer, methodically listing what needed to be done and when, and by whom. Dudley, of course, had not been required to do anything, but Harry had been expected to pitch in and assist with minor repairs, and packing and inventorying boxes. This information suggested that they'd originally intended to leave much closer to the end of summer.

Another paper that was particularly telling seemed to have been a brainstorming aid. From it, Harry learned that Uncle Vernon had been offered a new position at work--one that would require relocation. Aunt Petunia was fond of using comparison lists to sort through facts and make decisions. She and Vernon both must have taken this turn of events very seriously, because the page held several:

Accepting New Position vs. Retaining Current Position

Moving vs. Not Moving

Staying in Britain vs. Traveling Abroad

Dudley Staying at Smeltings vs. Dudley attending a Foreign School...

Harry had actually taken the time to read that one. His own name (shockingly) had been listed, along with Dudley's, as part of yet another list. Aunt Petunia had jotted down several ideas for both

boys' care during school holidays should Vernon accept an assignment outside of Britain. He rolled his eyes and snorted recalling his aunt's notation: Have the boy contact those red-haired louts... then grew thoughtful once again, struggling with the inconsistency. They'd evidently spared him one or two small thoughts, at least in the early stages of their planning. What had changed?

Australia he hadn't seen coming. That had literally popped up out of nowhere. Harry frowned slightly as he tried to recall. There had been a list of cities they were considering, but if he wasn't mistaken, all the foreign locations had been situated on the Western half of the Mediterranean Sea. This actually made a certain amount of sense since his aunt and uncle had always fancied a vacation home in Majorca. Harry had assumed they'd moved to one of the places on the list, either in Britain or abroad, and had left it at that. They didn't seem to be anywhere near London, so he hadn't bothered verifying his theory.

The little gold clock on his night stand chimed, breaking his train of thought. Almost time to go, it read. Harry sat up and took a deep breath, then paused for a second, assessing his own mood. He felt a little better now. A little more centered at least. He could probably get through the evening without biting anyone's head off at any rate.

He made sure Hedwig's feeding dishes were full and the window was open, checked his appearance in the mirror, then turned back to the desk. Hesitantly he walked over to it, half expecting there to be another two or three scolding notes waiting for him, but there were none. Harry bit his lower lip when he saw this, unsure if it was a good sign or not. Sighing, he let his eyes slide over the pages again.

Professor Dumbledore: (Harry, we know you aren't in Australia with the Dursleys. Tell me where you are, and I'll have you brought to Hogwarts until all this can be sorted out.)

Mr. Weasley: (If you agree to stay in the house, you can come to the Burrow straightaway!)

And Professor Dumbledore again: (Perhaps you misunderstood, Harry. I am afraid this is not a request.)

Harry frowned lightly, running his fingers over Dumbledore's statement about the Dursleys and Hogwarts. In the past, when some witch or wizard mentioned the Dursleys, and the phrase "sorted out" in the same breath, it meant someone was planning to go soothe his family's ruffled feathers and ensure that Harry could return the following summer. The green-eyed boy had never understood this. He'd made no bones about the fact that he was unhappy with his muggle relatives, and the Dursleys couldn't have expressed their feelings on the matter more plainly if they'd hired a skywriter, but it hadn't mattered. Every summer he'd been forced to return to Surrey.

Still frowning, Harry tidied the parchment into a stack, then regarded it thoughtfully. He knew what they wanted. They wanted him to admit where he was so they, who were older and wiser, and knew much better than he did what he needed and what he should do, could swoop in to "save" him.

They wanted him to return to the Dursleys.

Besides the fact that he recoiled automatically at the very notion, Harry had a strong suspicion that going to Privet Drive this summer would have been the worst possible thing for him. He'd been in no condition to deal with their derisive scorn and neglect at the beginning of the holiday, and he certainly didn't want to now.

Recalling the little flare of temper he'd had earlier, Harry pulled a face. He might not have been a flawless example of poise and manners just now, but he didn't even want to consider the state he might have been in if he'd been isolated on Privet Drive all summer. The Mountain Troll that he and his friends had taken on in their First Year probably would have seemed a right sweetheart by comparison.

It wasn't perfect. He still had nightmares and visions, and things to sort out, but Harry knew instinctively that working this summer had been good for him. The physical demands helped keep his grief and despair at bay. The fact that he was doing something useful and making his own way had been an enormous boost to his confidence, and being viewed by Tom and the others as worthy and capable, and

normal was a gift without price. It was like a soothing balm to wounds on his soul he hadn't even realized he possessed.

His life wasn't perfect, it might never be actually, but it was getting better.

He'd have to come clean once he returned to Hogwarts, but that was more than a month away.

It might be selfish, but he didn't want to give up the scarlet and gold room over the kitchen. Not until he had to.

I'm sorry sir, but no, Harry thought regretfully as he slipped the stack of parchment into one of the desk's drawers. I just can't. Not this time.

Back at Hogwarts, the headmaster's office was completely silent.

No one knew what to say.

No one knew what to do.

Dumbledore had just cast a locator charm, with very unexpected results.

Harry Potter

Location: Unknown

Status: Unknown

Trying again, Albus stood, waved his wand and commanded, "Point Me, Harry Potter!"

Again, the spell didn't perform as expected. The old wizard's wand jerked out of his hand, then began to spin aimlessly, acting like a compass exposed to a magnet. "Finite Incantatem!" Dumbledore finally ordered, making his wand drop back into his hand. He frowned at it a second, then tried, "Point Me, Arabella Figg!" Within seconds, his wand had oriented itself, and was pointing steadily at the gray-

haired witch. "Finite Incantatem." Shaking his head in confusion, he met Professor Snape's eyes at random. "Would you be so good as to try, Severus?" he requested, unable to keep the bewilderment from his voice.

Dumbstruck, the potions master nodded, and raised his own wand. "Point Me, Harry Potter!" he commanded, with similar results.

"Is Harry doing this, Albus?" Arthur whispered in awe a few minutes later when everyone had tried at least one charm without success.

"I do not know, Arthur," Dumbledore said, absently stroking his beard. "It seems unlikely, but I don't suppose we can discount any theories at this point." Wearing a thoughtful frown, the old wizard headed over to his fireplace and threw in a handful of Floo Powder. "Nathaniel Baker!" he called, and a few seconds later, his sandy-haired colleague's head was floating in the flames.

"Hey, mate!" he greeted cheerfully. "I cast a few charms around that muggle family for you. They won't be going anywhere without us knowing."

"Thank you, Nate. I was wondering if I could ask a favor?"

Nate pretended to consider. "Dunno, mate," he said with a cheeky grin. "The last time you wanted a favor, I wound up walking all the way across the bloody city!"

"This won't be nearly as involved," Albus said with a small chuckle. "I merely want you to attempt casting Point Me."

"Attempt?" Baker scoffed, looking slightly affronted. "I'll have you know that's one of me best spells. So what am I pointing to?"

"Harry Potter."

Nathaniel's eyes widened, but he did not question further. If Dumbledore didn't have the kid at Hogwarts by now, something was seriously wrong. "Point Me, Harry Potter," he ordered, then broke off staring at his wand as it jerked out of his hand, and repeated the

aimless spinning motion shown by the others just a few minutes before. "It's not working!" he exclaimed unnecessarily. "But it was working earlier! Albus, what's going on?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, Nathaniel, but I intend to find out."

Tom looked up from serving a customer, when the bells on the door leading to muggle London rang, and smiled automatically when he spotted Janet, Kitty, and Becky entering the pub.

"Well hello there," he greeted as they trooped in and took three empty seats at the bar. "Bit early, aren't you?"

Janet rolled her eyes in exasperation, while Kitty and Becky giggled amongst themselves. "I broke the First Rule of Parents With Small Children," she announced petulantly.

"Which is?" Tom prompted, amused.

"Never mention an excitement-inducing event more than one hour ahead of time. I mentioned that Steve was arriving this evening, and if that wasn't bad enough, I also verified that the Sparkster was coming over to babysit--at breakfast!" Janet moaned, holding her forehead, and mock-glaring at Tom when he began to chuckle. "That means my entire day has been one long ongoing variation of 'Is it time to go get Daddy?' and 'Is it time to go get Sparky?' I'm ready to strangle both of them."

"Now, now, they're just excited," Tom said bracingly. "Aren't you dears?" he asked, looking to the children for verification, and grinning at their exuberant nods.

"Oh, they're excited all right. They've been bouncing off the walls all day. Whatever he asks to be paid, I'm thinking of doubling it," Janet declared, raising an eyebrow at her children. "He's going to have a heck of a time getting them down for the night. Oh, speaking of Sparky, is he in the kitchen?"

"He's upstairs, I believe. Shall I fetch him?"

"Nah, I just wanted to show you something while he wasn't here. I'd probably embarrass him," Janet said, taking a quick peek around to make sure none of the other customers were watching. She unzipped the diaper bag and began to rummage through it while Tom looked on curiously. "I had some pictures developed while I was out today," she continued, removing a packet of photos and flipping through them, "and I got one of him by accident that was just too cute!" she grinned, finally locating the one she was looking for and passing it to Tom.

Not quite sure what to expect, Tom accepted the image, and studied it carefully. It was, a muggle photograph, completely still and unmoving, but the captured moment didn't disappoint. As Janet had promised, it was truly classic. She had somehow managed to get a shot of Harry while he'd been at her house a few nights ago. Tom grinned, then he chuckled, then he gave up and laughed out loud. Harry had a leggy plastic fashion doll in one hand, and a tiny garment in the other. He was holding both like they were somehow contaminated, and his entire bearing screamed 'You want me to do what??!'

Giggling herself, Janet filled in the back-story, while Tom whipped out his handkerchief and dabbed his watering eyes. "Both sets of grandparents threatened me with death if I didn't send lots of pictures. I was at a stopping point so I decided to grab the camera and see what they were up to," she explained before returning to the matter at hand. "He was so busy being scandalized, I don't think he realized I took it."

"So which one of you naughty things is responsible for this?" Tom said, still cackling gleefully as he turned the photo so the girls could see.

"Becky," Kitty said at once. "I told her he wouldn't want to play dolls, but she wouldn't listen" she grinned with relish, watching as her sister pouted and crossed her tiny arms on her chest.

"Parky just silly," the toddler said, obviously dismissing the incident. "Dolly's fun."

"Hmm. Fun for you maybe," Janet grinned, kissing the top of her younger daughter's head, and sharing a commiserating look with her older child. "You don't have to dress the darn things!" She grinned up at Tom and elaborated, "Becky adores playing with those dolls, but she has trouble dressing and undressing them. That means she goes to the nearest big person and they get the honor." She glanced at the picture again, and waggled her eyebrows at Tom. "That night Sparky drew the short straw. Look at that face!" she crowed in delight. "Becky couldn't have gotten a better reaction if she'd asked him to swallow a live toad!"

Tom nodded, and stuffed his handkerchief back in his pocket. "May I see the others?"

"Sure," Janet said looking pleasantly surprised and handing him the packet. "There are a few more that have the Sparkster in them--they're near the back. The rest are from the trip over, and our first few days here," she explained, as Tom flipped through the pictures. He stopped to smile at one of Harry, Becky, and Kitty piled into an overstuffed rocker-recliner. Harry appeared to be reading a story in that one.

"I think that's the best one," Janet with a soft smile when she saw which one Tom was looking at. "He's good with them."

"Indeed." Tom finished flipping through the stack, and replaced them in their envelope. When he looked up at Janet again, he was surprised to see her expression was faintly troubled. "Is something wrong?"

Janet looked a little indecisive, then sighed. "How well do you know Sparky's family, Tom?" she asked quietly.

"Not all that well, I'm afraid," Tom hedged, a bit surprised at her sudden shift in topic and attitude.

"I usually get doubles made when I have film processed," Jan said, indicating another bundle of photos. "When I saw how good those shots turned out, I thought his family might like to have the duplicates."

I separated them out, and put them in an envelope, but it wasn't until I tried to write a note that I realized I had no idea who these people are. None whatsoever."

Tom didn't know what to say to that, but Janet spared him the necessity of speaking.

"It just seemed odd you know?" she said, absently studying the contaminated doll shot. "He talks to us when we come by, he's been over to the house once, and he's babysitting tonight. I guess I just assumed that his aunt and uncle would want to meet me--look me over and make sure I'm not a serial killer or something. I'd want to check out anyone Kitty was that friendly with if the positions were switched." She shrugged and laughed nervously. "Maybe I'm just paranoid. Sparky's a sweet kid, and he's got a good head on his shoulders. Maybe they think he's responsible enough to make his own choices. I just thought I'd ask if you knew how I could contact them, or even if I should contact them about the pictures."

"Why not just ask the boy?"

"He doesn't seem to like to talk about his home life, so I've tried to respect that," Janet responded frankly, after motioning him closer and lowering her voice so that Becky and Kitty couldn't hear. "I thought at first that he was shy, or maybe he was just a private kind of kid, but that's not quite right. He'll chat about some things, but he doesn't discuss his family any more than he absolutely has to." Janet shrugged, then met Tom's gaze. "I don't even know their names. Is that normal around here?"

Tom blinked, realizing he didn't either. Harry typically referred to his muggle relatives as "my aunt and uncle." It was probably something Harry had been taught as a security precaution, it didn't do any good to have him in a secret location if every witch on the street knew the names of his muggle relatives. Of course Janet wouldn't know that. "It's the same here as it is anywhere else," he said, finally answering her question. "Some people keep their own counsel, and others are more open about their affairs."

"I suppose," Janet conceded, but she still looked uncertain.

"But?" Tom prompted, curious to know what was really bothering her.

Janet sighed. "Look I like him, and I trust him, or I wouldn't be leaving the girls with him tonight. There are a few things about that kid that I find a little strange, okay?"

"Such as?"

Janet pulled on one earlobe, mulling over what she wanted to say, before then noticed her daughters watching her avidly. "It's nothing big," she said, cutting her eyes toward the children. "I'm sure I'm just being silly."

Tom nodded his understanding, then excused himself to look after a hag who was signaling him.

Janet glanced up at the clock, then soothed her children's inquiries about Sparky's whereabouts, and gave them something to amuse themselves with. She supposed she could have taken Tom up on his offer to fetch the kid, but it didn't seem worth the trouble. Unless Sparky was running late, he'd be down in a few minutes.

Sighing a little, Janet tried to pinpoint what it was about the boy that she found so damn disconcerting. It wasn't anything obvious, nor was it anything having to do with him personally. Sparky had never been anything but nice to her. He was helpful, polite, patient with her children...no, it was as she told Tom. Little things. Like when he'd been over a few nights ago, and he and Kitty and Becky had decided to watch a movie. Becky and Kitty had come over to her asking for snacks, so they'd all gone into the kitchen, leaving Sparky in the living room to fetch and load the video.

From her place in front of the microwave, Janet could see in the living room. The girls had been engrossed with the ever-expanding bag inside, but she'd taken the opportunity to watch the boy instead. He'd found the title without too much trouble, then gone straight to the VCR and tried to load it, but he had it backwards or something and it wouldn't go in.

That in itself wasn't odd. It was an easy enough mistake to make if you weren't watching what you were doing. The thing that bothered her was he didn't seem to immediately know how to fix it. Unless his household didn't have one for some reason, Sparky should have been exposed to the VCR at an early age. Loading and unloading tapes should be as automatic to him as tying his shoes. He'd figured it out, but it had taken him a few seconds to reason his way through it. By that time the popcorn was ready, and she'd had other distractions to deal with.

Then there was the movie itself. She'd expected typical adolescent disdain for the animated feature Becky had chosen, God knew she had seen it enough with her brother and nephews and cousins, but it hadn't come. Unless he was an absolutely flawless actor, he'd honestly enjoyed the movie--like he'd never seen it before. It had been the same with toys--not just dolls--but toys. Everything seemed to be a new experience.

And that was weird. She could buy off on the fact that a British kid might not have seen an American children's movie, but whoever heard of a boy, of any nationality, who hadn't played with blocks for Heaven's sake! Forget weird, that was just plain wrong!

"Janet?"

"Hey, Janet!"

"Mom?"

"Mama?"

"Janet, are you in there?"

Jan shook herself out of her musings, and blinked at the black-haired boy in front of her. Sparky was looking at her, concerned, as were her daughters.

"Alright?" he asked, uncertainly.

"Yeah, I was just off in Never-Never Land," Janet assured, smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, I was just trying to work through a problem."

He seemed to relax at that. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting," he said, adjusting the strap of the bag on his shoulder.

"Your timing is impeccable, Spark. We were just a little early. So are you ready?"

Sparky glanced at Kitty and Becky, then gave her an uncertain smile. "I hope so."

Chapter 22 - Childcare 101: Does This Thing Come With Instructions?

Harry looked up from the list he was reading, and smiled at the splashes and squeals and good-natured squabbling drifting down from the upstairs bathroom. Currently, he was seated on the sofa in the Wright's living room, waiting for the "all clear" so he could go up and have a practical lesson in the fine art of diapering. The boy shook his head fondly, as he continued to read. At first glance, babysitting had seemed fairly simple, but he was quickly finding out that there was much more to it than he thought.

It all started yesterday when the Wrights had stopped by the Leaky Cauldron. Harry had expected to sit down and sort out a few last minute details, but Janet had surprised him. She and Tom had obviously put their heads together at some point, so instead of tying up a few loose ends, Harry had essentially been presented with an itinerary.

The teen rolled his eyes at the memory. His plans, it seemed, were entirely too simplistic. He'd expected to walk to Janet's, stay a while, and walk back to the Leaky Cauldron. Their version of events was a bit more detailed. First, Janet would be picking him up and taking them all out to eat, before returning to the townhouse. Once there, she'd bathe the girls and get them ready for bed before handing them over to his care, and departing for the airport. Instead of returning to the Leaky Cauldron when she returned, Harry had been informed that he would be staying overnight, and furthermore, since the next day was typically Harry's "day off," Tom told him he didn't have to hurry back.

Caught between amusement and exasperation, he had cocked an eyebrow at the two of them and dryly asked if any input was needed from him. Janet had looked a little taken aback, but Tom theatrically slapped himself on the forehead and quickly stepped in before Harry could say anything further.

"This is my fault, Sparky," he declared, seemingly abashed. "Janet was fretting about how to get you safely home if you didn't want to spend the night at her house. She doesn't know how long she'll be

gone, and she wasn't sure when your guardians should come by to collect you."

Oh. Struck speechless, Harry simply blinked in surprise. It had never occurred to him that Janet would worry about how he would be getting "home." He'd assumed he'd be expected to make his own way back, just as he'd expected to walk to her place from the Leaky Cauldron. Looking at the agenda in his hands, Harry was suddenly grateful for the lengths Tom must have gone to in order to insure Janet was comfortable with the babysitting arrangements without revealing anything Harry didn't want people to know.

"Now we're all aware of the fact that you can look after yourself, and if Janet's husband was expected earlier in the day this wouldn't be such an issue," Tom continued smoothly, as though refuting an argument Harry had voiced. "If you'll recall, we discussed the possibility of you walking back to the Leaky Cauldron and spending the rest of the night here, but considering the late hour, it just makes more sense for you to stay put at the Wrights' and walk back in the morning. I was supposed to have told you, but it completely slipped my mind," he finished apologetically.

Harry had been forced to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing out loud. Considering they'd never had any such discussion, his respect for Tom's storytelling abilities grew tenfold.

"Tom said the late hour was a cause of concern, and your guardians asked if I was still willing to keep you overnight. I thought you knew, Jimmy," Janet added earnestly, reaching out a hand. "We didn't mean to hurt your feelings or leave you out. Forgive?"

As soon as he'd realized how Tom had been trying to keep Janet from finding out awkward facts Harry had been pacified. Tom's story was actually pretty accurate, come to think of it. Had he procured this job while staying with the Dursleys, Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia almost certainly would have wanted him to stay overnight. The fact that they would have been more concerned about their own rest than his safety didn't need to be brought up.

Still, he'd played the part of "disgruntled teenager," rolling his eyes dramatically, and sighing "O-kay," in his best "put-upon" voice before relenting and clasping Janet's hand with a grin.

Frowning a bit, Harry raked his free hand through his hair, and blew out an aggravated breath. He couldn't deny that the "plan" made a good deal of sense, and skirted around some sensitive issues, but it still felt wrong to mislead his new friend this way. Trying to ignore his nagging conscience, the boy re-focused on his paper. He knew Janet found the way he rather stringently avoided discussing his "family" odd. She hadn't forced the issue, though, and for that he had been grateful. The fact was, she was very easy to talk to and entirely too quick on the uptake. If he slipped up and revealed the truth, he wasn't sure she would keep his secret. In fact, it seemed much more likely that she--in all intended kindness--would turn him over to the authorities.

Frustrated at the circular problem, Harry shook his head then chuckled when Becky's indignant "My duckie! My duckie!" brought him back to the present. He was being stupid. Janet liked him and all, but she probably wouldn't involve herself in his affairs. She had her own family to worry about, and anyway it had been a nice evening so far. There was no sense in borrowing trouble.

Relaxing a bit, Harry continued to replay the evening's events in his head. Dinner had been quick and casual. After a short discussion, (where he'd been allowed to vote!) they'd stopped at one of the hamburger restaurants located between Janet's house and the Leaky Cauldron. Harry had enjoyed himself immensely. He hadn't been out for Muggle fast food since Hagrid had taken him to Diagon Alley on his eleventh birthday. Besides which, with very few exceptions, he'd had nothing but "pub grub" at the Leaky Cauldron since the beginning of the summer holidays. It shamed him, and made him feel like the most spoiled, selfish prat on the planet, but after three solid weeks Harry found himself craving a little variety. Tom's food was good, and better by far than what he was used to dealing with in the summer, but he was grateful for the change of scene nonetheless.

The return to the Wrights' townhouse had also been a pleasant surprise. The first time he'd been over, Janet had been pleasant and

hospitable, but hadn't exactly gone out of her way for him. Of course the fact that she'd been trying to unpack as many boxes as possible at the time might have had something to do with it. Whatever the reason, this visit was slightly different.

As Janet showed him around, making sure he remembered the lay of the house and pointing out where things like first aid supplies were kept, Harry couldn't help noticing that she'd taken some time to prepare for his arrival. It wasn't anything flashy or overt, but little signs of welcome were present nonetheless; from the cozy-looking bedding stacked on one end of the couch to the newly-purchased package of his favorite biscuits sitting on the kitchen table.

Harry laid his paper aside with a bemused half-smile. Janet knew he had no previous experience, and was a little nervous about being left alone as "the big person on the scene." She'd lightened his mood and calmed him significantly when she'd presented him with the colorful pre-printed form he'd just finished reading. It was a witty little paper entitled "The Babysitter's Crib Sheet," that had spaces for parents to list contact numbers, routine and emergency instructions, and any additional information they cared to share.

"Cute, huh? I found those a couple of years ago, and all my sitters have liked them," she had said, grinning at his reaction when he read the title. "Take a look at that while I bathe the girls and see if you have any questions." She'd started to leave, then paused and faced him with an embarrassed grin. "Sorry if I got a little carried away," she said, nodding at the paper which was filled from top to bottom, front and back with her neat handwriting. "I wasn't sure what you needed to know, so I figured too much was better than not enough," she said with a shrug. "Just take what you need and leave the rest."

She'd obviously been afraid he might be insulted, but Harry could have kissed her. He had loads of questions that he wanted to ask, but every time he'd tried, the words all seemed to get hopelessly muddled. He didn't even know how to properly phrase some of them. Her paper had addressed a lot of his concerns--well, enough that he thought he could get through the evening anyway. Even better, the instructions were clear and detailed without talking down to him or being patronizing. A definite plus.

A fresh round of giggles and splashes could be heard upstairs now. Harry glanced up at the ceiling and grinned again. The duck issue had evidently been resolved, and by the sound of it, a good time was being had by all.

Well, okay, almost all, Harry amended with a smirk, when Janet squawked in surprise, and told her daughters to kindly keep the water inside the tub. The scene upstairs was a far cry from what he remembered bathtime being like when he was small.

Aunt Petunia had always avoided touching him as much as possible, so bathing him had always been a chore she especially detested. She'd been rough out of pure resentment, and it was a wonder she hadn't drowned him in the process. In all honesty, it was hard to say who had been more relieved when he'd finally been deemed "old enough" to bathe himself unsupervised.

Huffing impatiently, the boy forcibly shoved the thought out of his head. He paused and regarded the stairs again when he caught some new sounds: draining water, followed a couple of minutes later by the whir of a hair dryer. Shouldn't be much longer now, the boy thought glancing reflexively at the clock.

Searching for a new distraction, he rose from the couch and wandered aimlessly around. Janet had certainly been busy since the last time he'd been over. There were still a few random boxes stacked off to the side, but on the whole it looked like the downstairs was mostly in order. This is a nice place, Harry thought, absently reading random titles from the Wrights' media collection, and looking at the decorative items on display. I wouldn't mind having a place like this someday...

Surprised by his own subconscious admission, Harry cocked his head thoughtfully to one side, trying to determine what struck his fancy so. Before now he'd only known what he didn't like, specifically the stuffy formality and unrelenting perfection his aunt had always favored. Her rooms, while aesthetically pleasing, had a "showplace" atmosphere that tacitly demanded propriety and decorum. Everything had to be "just so" at all times.

Maybe it's because magic is okay here, or fantasy at least, Harry mused, peering through the glass door of Janet's curio cabinet, and grinning at the rather varied collection inside. His Muggle relatives probably wouldn't find fault with the Russian nesting dolls, sea shells, and "normal" knick knacks, but Aunt Petunia would have sniffed disdainfully at the old and "much loved" stuffed bear that sat proudly on the top shelf, and Janet's assortment of dragon and unicorn figurines probably would have driven Dudley from the room at a run.

No, Harry decided. That wasn't quite right. Janet could have had a bunch of rocks in her cabinet and it wouldn't have mattered. It was the general feel of their home rather than the possessions in it. There was a cozy, welcoming quality to the room, that was completely unlike the prim little lounge he'd known on Privet Drive. Janet's living room, while attractive and tastefully put together, was meant to be used, not merely admired.

In a weird sort of way, it actually kind of reminded him of the Burrow. Janet Wright and Molly Weasley both favored comfortable, overstuffed furniture, and there was a certain quirky eclectiveness to both houses that he found endearing. Janet place was just...calmer. The Burrow, while no less friendly and inviting, had a frenetic, always-on-the-go quality that was lacking here. And face it, Kitty and Becky had their moments, but they were no match for the Weasley siblings.

Speaking of whom...

More giggles and scampering footsteps overhead made Harry glance at the ceiling again, then he stopped short and rolled his eyes in disgust. Waiting was definitely not his strong suite. Come on, Potter, get a grip! he silently chided himself, impatient with his own jittery quailing.

"Hey! Ready?"

Even though he had been expecting it, Harry jumped like he'd been shot at Janet's cheerful summons. When he jerked around to face her, he saw she was standing on the top step, looking shocked and

properly ashamed of herself. "Jeez, Spark, I thought you heard us. I didn't mean--" she began, but he waved it off.

"I did hear you," he admitted, mounting the stairs and trotting up to meet her. He opened his mouth to explain, then closed it and smiled sheepishly when words failed him. "Don't mind me, I'm just being stupid," he said instead.

Janet didn't reply, just reached over and patted him between the shoulder blades, amusement and a touch of sympathy in her dark eyes. "It's really nice to know you care," she stated finally. "I think you'll do just fine. I'm just a phone call away if you have questions, and if things really go weird on you, Tom said you could go back to the Leaky Cauldron and he'd put the three of you in a room for the night."

That's true, Harry thought, nodding and offering her a lopsided smile. I also have Silas' mirror, and Dr. Granger's number if I need them. It was a weird feeling, really. He hoped he wouldn't need to use it of course, but he had more potential "help" at his fingertips for this one small job than he'd ever had for anything else he'd ever attempted.

"Thanks," he said aloud.

"No problem, but if you do leave, make sure to leave a note," Jan said, guiding him over to one of the bedroom doors. Knocking with her other hand, she called, "Hey, are you all decent in there?"

Minerva McGonagall hurried toward the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts, enchanted quill in hand, and a slightly confused frown upon her face. Albus hadn't been terribly forthcoming when he'd contacted her by Floo just now, but she'd learned to decipher his subtle mannerisms over the years.

He didn't say as much, but something was up.

Something he didn't feel comfortable discussing over the Floo Network.

Minerva shook her head distractedly. That was never a good sign.

"Ice mice," she said, upon reaching the gargoyle statue that guarded Dumbledore's domain. As she went up the spiral staircase and knocked on the door, she wondered again what calamity had arisen, and why on earth he wanted her to bring her registration quill of all things!

No one responded to her summons, which Minerva found odd. Albus normally seemed to get a great deal of enjoyment out of trying to unnerve his visitors. He'd call them in--by name--even before they'd had a chance to knock! McGonagall frowned, wondering if the Headmaster had stepped out for a moment, but no, she could hear the murmur of voices coming from inside. When she rapped again, and still no one answered, the Transfiguration professor cautiously pushed the door open, and found herself in a veritable beehive of activity.

Dumbledore was standing by the fireplace talking to one of the Hogwarts House Elves and an Order member that Minerva recognized as Kingsley Shacklebolt. Shacklebolt was an Auror, and conveniently enough, he was assigned to the case of the fugitive Sirius Black.

Professor Snape was sitting off to one side, scowling at several pieces of parchment.

Remus Lupin was writing what appeared to be an outline on a large blackboard while Sirius Black dictated.

Oddly enough, Arabella Figg, Molly Weasley, and Mr. Ronald Weasley were sitting around a table with three small Pensieves before them. Arabella and Molly were dropping silvery strands of thought into theirs, while Arthur Weasley gently coached his youngest son through the procedure so he could do the same.

While Minerva was taking all this in with a growing feeling of unease, the fireplace blazed, and Filius Flitwick, the Hogwarts Charms professor, came tumbling out. He glanced around at the people inside,

looking as bewildered as she felt, before spotting her and hurrying over.

"Minerva!" he said by way of greeting, then gestured at the room at large. "What's going on?"

McGonagall spread her hands helplessly. "I only just arrived, Filius, but I think we'll know shortly," she said, nodding in the headmaster's direction. Professor Dumbledore had finished his conversation and was heading in their direction. Shackelbolt and the house elf both nodded politely at them before taking their leave. Shackelbolt threw a handful of Floo Powder into the fireplace, and the house elf disappeared with a loud crack!

"Thank you for coming so quickly," Dumbledore greeted the two professors as he neared. He summoned an envelope from his desk, then turned all his attention to his deputy headmistress. "Minerva, would you be so kind as to address this to Mr. Harry Potter?" he requested, handing her the envelope.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow, but she complied without comment. Everyone on the teaching staff was accustomed to receiving rather odd and confusing instructions from the Hogwarts Headmaster from time to time. It was something of an inside joke amongst the faculty, and they'd often chatted about adding Can follow odd instructions without hesitation or complaint to the list of requirements for new professors. Stifling a sigh, Minerva accepted the envelope and laid it and her quill on a handy table. It was usually best to act first and ask questions later, so she drew her wand and did as he asked. Obediently, in response to her spell, the quill drifted over the envelope and wrote Mr. H. Potter

Then it stopped.

It hovered over the place where the address should be written for several seconds, before writing Unknown and skipping down to the next line. Flitwick and McGonagall exchanged confused glances, then looked to their employer for an explanation. They were slightly surprised to see Dumbledore watching the quill with what seemed to

be undue anticipation. Even now, he was staring at the struggling quill intently, as though trying to will it into divulging useful information.

Thinking it best not to say anything just yet, Minerva returned her attention to the paper. The quill was writing again, but seemed to be fighting against some unknown force. Laboriously it scratched out England, then floated gently down to the tabletop looking quite exhausted.

Dumbledore, Minerva noted, seemed disappointed but not overly surprised by the quill's behavior. She exchanged another look with Filius, then ventured a question. "Albus, what is going on here?"

Sirius, meanwhile, had noticed the two newcomers and hurried over to investigate. "Anything?" he demanded tensely, making all three professors jump.

"I'm afraid it isn't much, Sirius, but we do have another small clue," Albus replied, recovering quickly and indicating the envelope.

Sirius glanced down where Albus was pointing. "Oh, brilliant!" he snorted derisively, when he spotted the envelope. "That certainly narrows it down!"

"Better than 'The United Kingdom' or 'Europe.'" Dumbledore pointed out mildly.

"Or the planet Earth, yeah, yeah I know..." Sirius sighed, then visibly gathered himself, and quirked a half grin at the newcomers. "Professors," he greeted, before hurrying back in the direction he'd come.

Albus watched him leave, shaking his head in light exasperation before returning his attention to the two dumbstruck faculty members. "As you have probably deduced," he explained quietly, "a few things have come up with regard to Mr. Potter. I sent for Mr. Weasley by Floo, and I have owled Miss Granger. I am hoping they can provide some additional hints and clues. All we know at this point, is Mr. Potter is not with his Muggle relatives."

McGonagall glanced over to where Ronald Weasley sat with his parents then looked at the envelope and shook her head in confusion. "Albus, that quill should have been able to pinpoint his location in an instant!" she hissed in alarm.

"Yes, I know," Dumbledore acknowledged, looking honestly perplexed. "Somehow, Mr. Potter has become...untrackable. We have tried various location charms with no success," he reported, filling in recent events. "While it is possible that this may be young Harry's doing, the amount of energy needed to produce this type of defense is enormous. I don't know if any witch or wizard could accomplish it alone for an extended period of time. The phenomenon also seems to have started suddenly within the last few hours. A colleague of mine from the International Confederation of Wizards was able to successfully cast Point Me earlier today, but that same spell will not work for him now."

The Headmaster paused for a moment to let that sink in, before continuing. "That said, it seems much more likely that some sort of protective magic has been accidentally activated. I had hoped Minerva's registration quill would be proof against any such magic, but it appears things are not going to be that simple." He turned and met his Charms professor's bewildered stare. "That is where you come in, Filius. You were part of the Ministry Team that put additional protective measures in place after the Blood Charm was cast, and wards were set around Mr. Potter's Muggle home were you not?"

Flitwick blinked, then nodded slowly. "Yes, Albus, now that you mention it, but that was almost fourteen years ago!" he protested, after getting over his shock. "It's true I was part of the team, but I don't recall everything that was done," he admitted, thinking back to those wild and confusing days.

By the time the team had finished enchanting Harry Potter's folder, no one could swear that they knew every single spell that had been cast. He told his colleagues as much, then added, "They may not be complete, but I do have the notes I took, and I know of several good reference materials for identifying unknown Charms."

"Good. We will obviously have need of them," Dumbledore said, giving his Charms professor a small smile. If they were indeed dealing with protective magic, the spells surrounding Harry would have to be identified before they could be broken or circumvented. Fortunately for them, Filius Flitwick was almost without peer as a Charms Specialist. He, above anyone, had the best chance of figuring this mess out in a quick and expedient manner.

"Very well," Flitwick agreed, looking a little unsure. "I will need to go to my office, and the library to gather materials," he said apologetically.

"I can help, Filius," McGonagall offered, finally shaking off her dazed disbelief. "I can fetch the reference materials from the library if you like."

"Thank you, Minerva," Flitwick replied with a grateful smile. "That would be most helpful."

"Excellent," Albus said, clapping his hands together, and turning to survey the room. "I don't believe this is the best place to have this discussion--it's getting a little crowded. We'll allow time for everyone to finish what they're doing and move to the Charms classroom in...half an hour?"

"Albus! That's barely enough time to gather the materials!" Minerva protested.

Dumbledore held his hands up placatingly. "Time is of the essence, I am afraid. You are both good at reading and listening at once, and I will fill in any details you miss. Bring the materials with you, and we'll let the others begin."

"Pig Out! Pig Out! Pig Out!"

Harry raised a haughty eyebrow at the two chanting sisters as he shook two tiny, rubber pigs in one hand, then let them fly like he was rolling a pair of dice. "Come on, come on!" he encouraged, as they bounced on the table before coming to a halt. When they did, both

the little pigs landed on their feet. "Hah! Double Trotter!" he crowed, adding twenty to his tally and scooping up the pigs again.

He and Kitty and Becky were playing a simple but strangely compelling game called Pass the Pigs. There wasn't a lot to it, really. One simply rolled two rubber pigs and gained--or lost--points depending on how they fell. The object of the game was to throw the pigs and score as many points as possible in one turn. According to the instructions, the first player to get 100 points was the winner.

It sounded simple, but Harry soon discovered it wasn't so easy. He'd rolled the infamous "Pig Out" and by doing so lost all his points more than once that evening. It hadn't really mattered, though. The Wrights liked to play a slightly modified version in which each player racked up as many points as they could before they rolled "Pig Out" or an "Oinker." Whoever had the highest tally before losing all points won that "hand".

Grinning at his hecklers, Harry rolled the pigs again. They'd been at it longer than he'd expected, although the real "competition" was mainly between Kitty and himself. The older girl was a pretty fair sport, but she despaired over her baby sister's inability to play "right," and grumbled a bit about the way the toddler was accommodated.

Becky had a rather limited grasp of numbers, so she didn't really understand the scores. She liked to play with the little pigs and generally had to be coaxed into rolling them when her turn came. She also still had the unfortunate tendency to put small things in her mouth. Harry had quickly learned to keep a sharp eye on her whenever she had the game pieces in her possession.

They played a few more hands before Kitty called a halt. "Let's do something else now."

Becky seemed to be growing weary of the game as well, so Harry shrugged agreeably. "Okay," he said, gathering the game pieces and replacing them in their slim, black case. I might have to look into buying one of these for myself, he speculated, eyeing the case appraisingly. It was made of hard plastic and no larger than a Muggle checkbook. Harry hadn't purchased a lot of frivolities, since he was

limited by the size of his trunk, but this tiny thing would probably be all right. Heck, if things got tight, he could always carry it in his shirt or jeans pocket.

A glance at the clock brought some of Janet's instructions to mind: When it starts getting late, try and interest them in a quiet activity, she had advised. It will be easier to get them down for the night if they've slowed down enough to realize they're tired!

Good point, Harry thought, then faced his small charges. "So, what do you want to do now?" he asked. "Shall I read you another story?" he offered.

"Can we pay wif Dollies?" Becky asked hopefully. "Peas?" she added, giving him her best and most adorable pleading look.

Aw, jeez! Harry groaned inwardly, holding his forehead. That was absolutely the last thing he wanted to do, but it was really hard to say no to that face. And she probably knows it, too! he thought uncharitably.

On the upside, if he did get dragooned into playing "dolly" again, he could write Ron a very interesting letter...

Dear Ron:

Today was quite educational. I undressed a beautiful blonde and I held a naked babe in my arms...

Harry wiped his hand down his face until he had his mouth covered and fought down the urge to giggle. Tempting as it was, he wasn't sure he could run fast enough to escape Ron once the redhead discovered that Harry had, in point of fact, lifted a freshly-bathed toddler onto a changing table, and changed a doll's clothes.

And the payback...

Harry winced a little at the teasing he was in for if Ron and his brothers found out what he'd really been up to! Hmmm. Maybe writing

a prank letter isn't such a good idea...but it would be funny for a little while!

Fortunately, Kitty came to his rescue. "Sparky doesn't like dolls, Becky," she said authoritatively. "Think of something else."

Now there's a tall order, Harry thought, watching in amusement as Becky crossed her arms and stuck her lower lip out in an exaggerated pout. Playing with dolls might be the only thing they haven't done yet, come to think of it. Harry shook his head and smiled. They'd had a grand time coloring, reading, having tea parties, messing around with loads of toys, and playing Pass the Pigs .

Unfortunately, it was beginning to show. Harry glanced around and cringed. Janet's once-lovely living room was something of a disaster area now, because Kitty and Becky kept bringing things downstairs. "I know," he said brightly, trying to make it sound like great fun, "let's tidy up, then we can watch a video!"

"Tidy up!" Kitty protested, looking at the scattered items with distaste. "Do we have to?" she asked, making a big show out of stretching and yawning. "I'm tired!"

Ah, so that's the way you want to play. Harry looked down at the younger girl, and arched an eyebrow. Sorry, but you're not fooling me. I lived with the King of Manipulation most of my life, he thought, recalling how Dudley would try--and succeed--to get out of doing chores. Eyes glinting with mischief, Harry shrugged, and tried to act sympathetic before dropping his bombshell. "Of course not, Love. I can clean up, but if you're really that tired then you should go to bed straightaway. Go on now, both of you, and I'll see you in the morning."

Kitty blinked at him in surprise, not expecting this tactic, but Becky was having none of that. "NO!" she objected immediately. "No wanna go bed! Want moobie!" she urged, picking up a stuffed cat and tugging on her sister's hand.

As her majesty commands, Harry snickered to himself, then smirked knowingly when Kitty mumbled something about not being that tired,

and bent to gather an armful of things. Gotcha! he thought, before moving to help. Unfortunately, they'd brought down more than he realized, and it was going to take multiple trips to get everything put away. "We need a container," he mused aloud. "We'd save ourselves some time if we had something to put all this in," he continued, looking around hopefully. Janet appeared to have broken down all the empty moving boxes, but surely there was something else...

"What about the laundry basket?" Kitty suggested.

Harry brightened. Good plan! "Perfect!" he said with a grin, enjoying the way she reacted to his praise. "Where is it? We can chuck everything in there, then I'll carry it upstairs for you."

Kitty nodded, growing more enthusiastic about the project. "I'll get it!" she said, then dashed out with Becky dogging her heels.

Harry grinned after them. Kitty, he could tell, got heartily sick of her baby sister tagging after her, but most of the time she was rather good about it. He was glancing around, trying to figure out if anything should be put in the basket first, when a loud crack made him jump. What was that?! he wondered angrily. It sounded familiar, like the sound of a gunshot, or a car backfiring, or...

No.

Oh, no.

Harry swallowed tightly, feeling as though someone had him by the throat. He hadn't expected to be found so soon, but someone had definitely arrived. He could feel them looking right between his shoulder blades. Heart thumping fearfully, Harry slowly turned, and found himself looking into bright green eyes the size of tennis balls that shone with blatant adoration.

Dobby the house elf stood before him, looking both pleased and relieved. "Harry Potter, sir! Dobby is glad to see that Harry Potter is not hurt!" he bubbled excitedly, then his ears drooped and his expression turned sorrowful. "Harry Potter is being very naughty--causing much worry at Hogwarts!"

What?! Harry blinked at the little elf. "But I just spoke to Professor Dumbledore--and Sirius--and a whole load of people just this evening!" he spluttered indignantly. "I told them I was fine! Besides, I can't leave! I'm babysitting!"

Now it was Dobby's turn to blink. "Dobby has not come to fetch Harry Potter. Dobby is running an errand for Master Dumbledore," he explained. "Dobby is just stopping by to check on Harry Potter since Master Dumbledore is worrying," the house elf explained. Harry was about to reply, but a loud thump in the kitchen startled them both.

"Becky! You...are...not...helping!"

Harry started at Kitty's exasperated shout, and her sister's indignant wail. Oh my God! They'll be back any second!

"Dobby, you've got to get out of here before they see you!" he hissed desperately, making little shooing motions with his hands.

Nodding his understanding, the house-elf snapped his fingers, and disappeared with another crack!

Harry heaved a great sigh of relief, then closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. I really could do without so many close calls in my life, he thought wryly, holding his head in his hands.

He stood there for a few seconds before it occurred to him that it had gotten awfully quiet. Harry frowned behind his hands. That was odd. Kitty and Becky generally took a little longer to settle down once they started shouting and crying. Removing his hands, he spotted them standing in the kitchen doorway, looking quite stunned. Harry raised an eyebrow at them, then put his hands on his hips. "Well, come on then," he prompted, nodding at the basket Kitty held. "The work's not going to get done on it's own."

"But..." Kitty glanced at him, but made no move to come closer. Her attention seemed riveted to something behind him. Becky, her eyes huge, unconsciously shifted closer to her older sister.

Concerned now, Harry frowned. "What is it?" he asked, starting to feel agitated himself. "What's wrong?" Instead of replying, Kitty pointed behind him. Sighing, Harry turned to look and felt his mouth drop open in shock. It seemed the well meaning little elf had left a "gift" for him before taking his leave.

The living room was completely spotless.

Back at Hogwarts, the impromptu meeting of the Order of the Phoenix had re-convened in the Charms classroom. The blackboard Remus had been writing on was brought along, and Remus, Sirius, Arabella, and Arthur were standing in front of Flitwick's desk, preparing to share what they'd learned.

"This is what we know," Remus Lupin stated, pointing to some items listed on the blackboard with his wand. "According to the Weasley family, Harry arrived at King's Cross Station with the rest of his peers on July first. His uncle was late arriving, and Molly needed to leave. She didn't feel comfortable leaving Harry alone, so she invited him to come home with her until things could be sorted out.

"As they were leaving, Harry spotted, or claimed to have spotted his uncle. He thanked the Weasleys for staying, declined Molly's offer to escort him over, and the two parties went their separate ways.

"There's a space of a few hours that can't be positively accounted for, but Harry did eventually arrive in Surrey," Lupin went on, tapping the board with his wand. "Arabella Figg noticed his hand on her locator clock was still pointing to "Traveling" before the Order meeting on July first. This was unusual, but he didn't appear to be in any danger, so she cast a monitoring charm, and came to the meeting. When Harry's status was still "Traveling," a few hours later, she became concerned. When Professor Dumbledore called a break, she and went home to investigate.

"While she was there, Harry's hand finally moved to number four Privet Drive. We estimate his time of arrival as approximately eleven o'clock in the evening--significantly later than usual. We took it for granted that he was simply late getting home for whatever reason,

and didn't investigate further. Harry has been corresponding with several people on a regular basis. He mentioned getting a summer job, and seemed fine. We didn't suspect anything was amiss until July fifteenth.

Remus paused to take a sip of water, then continued. "Arabella, having only just returned from a mission, immediately went to check on Harry. When she arrived at the Dursley's residence, she found that the property was being offered for sale. She made a few inquiries, and discovered Harry's Uncle Vernon had been transferred to Australia.

Naturally, we thought that meant that Harry was in Australia as well. We contacted Albus immediately. He contacted a colleague of his, Nathaniel Baker, from the International Confederation of Wizards. Baker was asked to find Harry so that we could make arrangements to bring him back to Britain.

"Sirius, Arabella and I returned to her house in Surrey after leaving the Headmaster's office. Sirius changed into Padfoot, and caught Harry's scent. He also found a note that Harry had written to Mrs. Figg," Remus said, pointing farther down the board. "We do not know the purpose of the visit, but some time between the first and the fifteenth of July, Harry went to Wisteria Walk. The note itself didn't contain any useful information. It was undated, and seemed rushed. At first we thought he must have written it out while his relatives were waiting for him, but he may have simply been anxious to be on his way."

Sirius and Arabella came forward, and Remus moved off to the side. Sirius swept the room with his pale blue eyes, but for once there was no joking humor in his demeanor. "Remus has told you what we know," he stated. "Now Arabella and I will tell you what we think. These are things we jotted down as they occurred to us, so unlike the professor there, ours are not necessarily in perfect chronological order."

Nodding, Arabella took her cue. "We started at King's Cross, and spoke to several station employees who were on duty at the time Harry should have been there, and quite a few people remember

seeing a boy who fit Harry's description. Those green eyes of his evidently stay with people," she said with a sad smile. She paused a moment to collect herself, and noticed she wasn't the only one reminiscing. Finally, she shook herself out of her reverie, and continued.

"From what we were able to gather, he waited quite a while. Several people recall approaching him, and asking if he needed help. "No one remembers seeing Harry leave, but I checked the schedules while I was there," the old witch continued. "There's a commuter train from King's Cross to Little Whinging that leaves around 9:00 p.m.," she said, pointing to another line on the blackboard. "Since we know Harry was on Privet Drive at approximately 11:00 p.m., it seems likely that he caught that train, and made his own way back to his uncle's house from Little Whinging Station."

"It was by accident that we discovered Harry had gone to Arabella's house," Sirius stated. "I changed into Padfoot, and found a fairly recent trail. Remus also thinks he may have picked up Harry's scent at the Leaky Cauldron, but he isn't sure. I followed it to the edge of the street where it suddenly stopped. Unless Harry's learned how to Apparate, we think he may have summoned the Knight Bus."

"Actually, we're fairly certain that's what happened. I make it a point to check the Knight Bus logs when I've been away," Arabella added. She paused a second, then shrugged matter-of-factly. "It's part of my monitoring of the the neighborhood for unauthorized witches and wizards. The Knight Bus staff are used to me dropping by, so no one looked at me twice when I showed up a few days ago. Their travel logs indicate they responded to a call on Wisteria Walk very late in the evening on July first. We do not have irrefutable evidence supporting our claim, but we believe Harry must have summoned the bus. I was at Hogwarts at the time, and Harry and I are the only witch and wizard who live in that neighborhood."

"Diagon Alley was one of the stops on the Knight Bus log after Wisteria Walk," Sirius added. "That may have been Harry's destination. To date, the Knight Bus has not returned to Wisteria Walk or Privet Drive." He stopped and heaved a great sigh. "After that, Harry simply disappears," he said waving his hand in a circle. "He

isn't registered at the Leaky Cauldron, but we have reason to believe he's been there. He has also been corresponding regularly with several people--Ron, Hermione, Albus, Remus, and myself." He sighed again, and looked exasperated. "He hasn't asked for help, in fact, he hasn't even hinted that anything was wrong. We know from his letters that he is employed somewhere, but we don't know where."

"We spoke with Grunnings Drills, the estate agent that was hired to sell the property on Privet Drive, and some of the neighbors, but we didn't learn very much," Arabella stated, scrunching her nose in annoyance. "We do know from several sources that the Dursleys left in a hurry. They originally planned to stay through the summer, and leave closer to the beginning of the new school year, but something came up and they suddenly changed their plans. We know Vernon and Petunia left about the same time Harry was due back." She paused a moment, then continued with a troubled frown. "On a side note, the neighbors seem to think that Harry goes to a place called St. Brutus' Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys, and no one remembers seeing Harry at all. I think we can safely say that he didn't approach any of the neighbors for help on the night of July first."

Dumbledore nodded. "Thank you Arabella, Remus, Sirius. Your initiative has saved us a great deal of time, though I wish you would have shared your suspicions earlier."

"I'm sorry, Albus. I just couldn't believe that Harry could be running around without being recognized," Arthur said sadly. "I've seen how people spot him..." he said with a shrug, then turned to the dark haired man up front. "Sorry Sirius. I guess you had the right of it after all."

"Let's just find him, all right?" Black responded gruffly, though not unkindly. He frowned thoughtfully, then addressed the room again. "We're just guessing, but we think someone may be helping him. We also suspect he's using an alias, and since he hasn't been spotted, we presume he's found a way to disguise himself, and his scar as well."

"Indeed?" Albus raised an intrigued eyebrow and steeped his fingers in front of him.

"It stands to reason, Headmaster," Remus said a bit defensively.

"No, no, you are quite right," Dumbledore agreed. "I merely meant if young Harry figured out how to hide his scar, he has outsmarted some of the premier Charms specialists of the day--myself and Filius included," he explained, exchanging a rueful look with the little Charms professor.

"Oh, my yes," Flitwick said, looking up from the notes he was reading and putting his two Knuts in. "I've never seen such a stubbornly resistant mark. We tried Glamours, Concealers, and every Healing Charm we could think of..." he trailed off, then lowered his voice as though sharing something illicit. "We even tried the Mark Remover."

Snape looked up from his seat near the fire, interest piqued. "The Mark Remover failed?"

"Not exactly," Minerva supplied. "The product covered his scar as promised, but Mr. Potter was allergic to it."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, eyes lost in the past. "That was one of the main reasons we decided against trying to hide him with a wizarding family after Sirius was incarcerated. That and the strength of the Blood Protection, of course. We had no way of knowing Voldemort's Dark Forces would crumble so easily without him. Hiding Harry away behind the strongest protection we could come up with seemed like the best thing to do at the time."

The bit at the train station seems off," Arthur ventured, breaking the silence they'd fallen into as each recalled their own memories of those dark times. He shook his head sadly. "I still can't believe Harry would lie to Molly about his uncle!"

Molly and Ron, who had both been unusually quiet during Remus and Arabella's briefing, spoke up almost as one.

"He didn't, Arthur," Molly insisted.

"He saw someone, Dad!" Ron said earnestly. "I saw him too, just for a second..." He trailed off and shrugged. "He was a few meters away, but he certainly looked like Harry's uncle."

"But neither of you thought to verify the man's identity before leaving," Snape sneered condescendingly.

Ron flushed angrily, while his mother looked shamed. It was true they had accepted Harry's word without hesitation, but why? The station had been rather crowded, and the man certainly hadn't been nearby. Part of it, at least from his point of view, was his own desire to make things up to Harry. He still felt bad about accusing him of lying at the beginning of the year, but there was more to it than that.

Frowning deeply, Ron allowed his mind to wander, and found himself recalling first year. Specifically the end of the year, when he and Harry and Hermione had entered the Chamber of Keys, while trying to find the Sorcerer's Stone. A corner of his mouth tugged upward. What was it Hermione had said?

"These birds...they can't be here just for decoration..." *

Yes. That was right. At first, they'd all thought a flock of birds was with them in the chamber. They'd watched for a while, then his dark-haired friend had gotten that look he always got when something occurred to him. Ron smiled softly. If he closed his eyes, he could almost see it...

"They're not birds!" Harry said suddenly. "They're keys! Winged keys--look carefully. So that must mean..." he looked around the chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. "...yes--look! Broomsticks! We've got to catch the key to the door!" *

Slowly, Ron opened his eyes and raised his head, an expression of dawning comprehension on his face.

"--look carefully!"

"...yes--look! Broomsticks!"

Look...

That's it! Ron leapt to his feet and hurried down to his Pensieve, without bothering to wonder if he should have asked permission or if he was out of line. Arthur and Molly automatically started to call him back, but the teachers in the room, recognizing a student on the verge of discovery, motioned for them to remain silent.

Reaching the small bowl, Ron drew his wand and prodded the silvery mass inside. He'd never once doubted Harry's word on anything he saw because Harry was usually so sharp-sighted! Everyone in his family had noticed--even his mum. When telling tales of their Seeker's Quidditch exploits, the twins liked to joke that Harry could spot a gnat wiping its feet on the next-door-neighbor's mat, and most of the time they weren't far off the mark. Unfortunately, Ron recollected with a barely suppressed grimace, Harry had been far from his best when the Hogwarts Express had pulled into King's Cross Station.

Trying to remember the instructions his father had given him, Ron searched through the memories he had placed in the Pensieve. "It didn't occur to anyone to question him because Harry's usually so good at spotting things," he explained distractedly as he worked. "But that day--that day at the station...here!" he said when he found the one he wanted, and brought it up for the others to see.

Ron, Fred, George, Ginny and Hermione were standing almost protectively around Harry at King's Cross Station. They were talking about going to Diagon Alley later in the summer. Harry smiled, and nodded, but seemed distracted. Every now and then, he would frown slightly, and scan the station, presumably looking for his uncle. This went on for a few seconds, then Harry got a mildly annoyed expression on his face. He blinked rapidly a few times then snatched his glasses off and rubbed his eyes impatiently.

"All right there, Harry?" the image of Ron asked, when Harry stopped rubbing his eyes and began to polish his glasses with his shirt-tail.

Harry smiled a bit. "Yeah, just tired," he assured.

Ron stopped the memory, then faced the others questioningly, unsure if they'd caught what he was trying to show them. If nothing else, Harry looked pale and tired. Tired enough to make a mistake, come to think of it, but Ron was more interested in his friend's behavior with regard to his glasses.

He needn't have worried. As each viewed the Pensieve, it became evident that the Order members got the message loud and clear. McGonagall and Dumbledore both unconsciously adjusted their own spectacles, before exchanging a significant look.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore stated at length. "That clears a few things up."

"Bollocks!" Sirius disagreed, scowling. "It doesn't explain anything! Say Harry did make a mistake. Go even farther and assume his uncle never showed up! Why would he bother going to Surrey at all? Surely it occurred to him that something was off! Why didn't he just send Hedwig to one of us?"

"I'm afraid that is my fault, Sirius," Albus sighed regretfully. "Harry has gotten impatient with his Muggle relatives and left the safety of his protective wards in the past. I wanted to avoid this if possible, so I told him his friends would be safer if he returned to his aunt and uncle at least initially. I also made him promise that he would contact them only in the most desperate of emergencies."

"I should jolly well think being stuck at a train station qualifies!" Arthur blurted almost accusingly.

"As do I, Arthur," Albus agreed. "Harry, on the other hand, does not appear to. He did not write to me until almost a week later, and then he only mentioned his newly employed status and his scar."

Ron frowned worriedly at that. "Has Harry's scar been bothering him, sir?"

Dumbledore paused, as if considering how much to say. "In a manner of speaking," he hedged. "Harry hasn't complained about his scar

paining him, but Voldemort's rebirth appears to have affected it in a few unexpected ways."

Ron didn't look satisfied with the answer, but his headmaster didn't offer any additional information. Sighing, the redhead tried a different tack. "Have you contacted Hermione, sir?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I owled Miss Granger just before I placed the firecall to the Burrow, and if I failed to mention it before, thank you for your assistance, Mr. Weasley. Your insights have been most helpful."

Ron knew a dismissal when he heard one, but he tried to get permission to stay anyway. This was his best friend after all. He knew Harry's quirks better than anyone except maybe Hermione. Unfortunately the adults were having none of it. After being warned not to discuss Harry's current situation with anyone, his father had escorted Ron back to the Burrow in spite of his protests.

Sighing, Ron gave the fireplace one last glare before climbing up to his room. He had a couple of letters to write, and the first one was going to be addressed to the daft git he called his best friend.

In a certain London townhouse, three children aged almost three to almost fifteen stared at each other in a silence that was beginning to become oppressive.

Harry was aghast at the possible consequences of Dobby's actions. Any second now, he expected to receive a letter from Mafalda Hopkirk in the Improper Use of Magic Office, then soon after that Ministry Wizards from the Magic Reversal Squad would come swooping in. He would be expelled...Kitty and Becky would be Obliviated...they would snap his wand...

He'd worked himself into such a state he nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt someone patting his arm. Blinking, he looked down and found himself looking into Kitty's soft brown eyes. Now that she'd gotten over her surprise, she seemed surprisingly calm. Calmer than he felt, at any rate. "Don't worry, it's okay," she assured him,

unconsciously mimicking her mother. "Sometimes stuff like that happens when you wish really hard."

Frowning, a bit, Harry regarded her curiously. "What do you mean?" he finally asked guardedly.

Kitty and Becky looked at each other, then seemed to come to a decision. "We want to show you something, okay? Just don't freak out, and don't tell my mom."

Later, when Harry had a chance to think things over rationally, he couldn't believe he'd reacted the way he had. Everything seemed backward. He was supposed to be comforting them for crying out loud, not the other way 'round! The whole situation felt surreal--like it just couldn't be happening.

So he'd nodded.

Becky, who was nearby but hadn't been touching him, approached him and hugged one of his legs. "We play ball, 'Parky,'" she grinned, trying to make him do the same. "'Parky like ball?"

Harry quirked a half smile at that. "Yeah," he agreed. "'Parky like ball."

Kitty nodded then held out a hand. A few seconds later, she was holding what appeared to be a perfectly round ball of white light.

Harry was impressed in spite of himself. "When did you learn to do that?" he asked curiously. Kitty shrugged.

"A long time ago," she said. "I was just a little kid. My night light had burned out, and I woke up alone in the dark." She hesitated, looking like she thought he might tease her, but eventually, plowed ahead. "I was scared. I don't like the dark," she confessed quietly. "I wished really hard that my light was still working, and this is what happened."

Nodding, Harry glanced at the dark-haired toddler. "Can Becky do things like that as well?"

"Sort of. She can't make her own ball yet, but she can change mine. She likes to make it different colors," Kitty told him. "Mom was really surprised at how fast she learned her colors," she confided with an impish grin, offering the softly glowing sphere to her sister.

Becky seized the opportunity. This was evidently a favorite game of hers. "Boo!" she commanded, touching the white globe. Obediently it changed color, and before Harry's astonished eyes it turned blue. Giggling at his reaction, she pointed at the ball again. "Geen!" Harry smiled when the ball turned green, but Becky wasn't through with him yet. "See?" she asked, looking up at him seriously. Harry indicated that he did. "Good. Now 'Parky do," she said with a grin, eager to get him in the game.

Harry regarded her warily. "Sparky do what?"

Rebecca gave him a guileless look. "Do wed," she suggested.

"I really don't know if I can," Harry admitted. Becky shrugged but didn't let him off the hook.

"Ty," she invited.

"All right," he conceded, hesitantly reaching out to touch the ball. It felt very odd and made his fingers tingle. The thing held it's shape, but didn't have a solid form. It also shone like a light bulb, but didn't give off any noticeable heat. Both girls were looking at him expectantly, so he shrugged and decided to give it a go. Red, she wants, he mused distractedly. Red. He closed his eyes and thought about strawberries...quaffles...his quidditch robes... He knew something had happened when he heard the two laugh happily. He opened one eye cautiously, then grinned proudly when he spotted the now red ball.

"Sweet!" Kitty crowed, examining the now ruby-red sphere. "That is so cool!"

"So what do you think it is?" Harry asked curiously.

Both girls looked at him like he was simple-minded. "Magic," they replied, as though it should be obvious.

"Just like in the movies," Kitty grinned, then remembered something. "So," she said gesturing at the living room, "can we watch our video now?"

Albus waited until Arthur returned from seeing young Ronald home, then re-convened the meeting. "What have you discovered, Filius, Minerva?" he asked, addressing his Charms and Transfiguration professors. "Have you discovered why Harry is suddenly immune to tracking spells?"

Flitwick and McGonagall shared a grim look, before the little Charms professor responded. "I think so, Albus," he admitted, with a drawn-out reluctance that made Sirius want to strangle him. Glancing around, the Animagus was pleased to note that he wasn't the only impatient one. Molly, Arthur and Arabella were all on the edge of their seats, and Remus was gripping his desk so hard it creaked.

"And...?" Dumbledore finally prompted.

"By all appearances, a last-resort failsafe mechanism has been activated," Flitwick said, looking troubled. "But I'm not sure why. Mr. Potter's relatives are still alive..." He trailed off and shook his head, frowning.

"Sorry, Filius, but could you back up a bit?" Remus asked, earning grateful looks from Sirius and Arthur. "What failsafe are you talking about, and what do the Dursleys have to do with it?"

So Professor Flitwick launched into an edited version of the events of early November 1981. He told about the defensive magic that had been cast, and how the decision to use Harry's file to watch over him had been made.

"If he was in some sort of danger while under his relatives' guardianship, and required assistance, his folder was spelled to alarm," the Charms professor explained. "The failsafe mechanism

was put into place as a last means of defense should Mr. Potter lose his guardians again. When we cast it, we believed it would only activate in the event of their deaths. Since his Muggle family is very much alive, we must consider other circumstances...for example if they disowned or abandoned him, or Mr. Potter refused to go with them..." He trailed off looking exceptionally grave.

"So the Protective Blood Charm that has kept him safe all these years has been broken?" Albus asked quietly. Flitwick nodded, and the old headmaster sighed heavily.

"But why? Why now?" Molly asked, looking grieved. "I still remember when he and Ron brought Ginny back to us...why not then?"

"Yes, and what about when he ran away from his aunt and uncle the summer before his third year?" Arthur put in.

"And just last month when he was portkeyed to that graveyard," Sirius added.

Flitwick nodded briskly, and raised his hands for silence. When they had settled down, he continued. "You're confusing Mr. Potter being in danger, and Mr. Potter having no guardians. The failsafe would not become active as long as he was under his Muggle relatives' guardianship, but his folder should have alerted us when he was in physical danger."

"Yes, it should have," Dumbledore interrupted thoughtfully as though recalling something. "Arabella," he said, turning to face the gray-haired witch, "you wrote to the Ministry regarding the flying automobile incident, did you not?" He waited for Mrs. Figg to nod, then prompted, "And what was their response?"

"Not much," Belle admitted, shuffling through a folder she had brought with her, and pulling out what appeared to be a Ministry form letter. "Initially, they wrote back, and said they had received my letter, and assured me the matter would be looked into." She paused for a second, looking through her folder again, then pulled another letter out. "A couple of weeks later, I got this letter from the Minister's office. They assured me that Harry's folder seemed to be in order, and

speculated that it didn't alarm because he had left his uncle's house of his own free will."

"I see," Dumbledore said, frowning thoughtfully, and steeping his fingers in front of him. He glanced up at Flitwick. "Would you agree with their assessment, Filius?"

"Actually, no," Flitwick admitted. "Unless the charms were modified drastically, free will shouldn't have mattered. You are part of the Wizengamot, Albus, I know there was a request for modification early on. Were there others?"

Dumbledore didn't have to think long to answer that one. "No, Filius. There was only the one request, and as I recall, it was resolved before the Charms Specialist was even able to get to it."

The little Charms professor nodded, then paused to gather his thoughts, and went on. "The failsafe mechanism is conditional magic. The lock of hair we placed inside Mr. Potter's folder allows it to be "aware" of his physical state, or as aware as an inanimate object can be. If he had been or had become seriously ill or injured, for example, the failsafe would have activated immediately."

"So does that mean he's seriously ill or injured now?" Remus asked, half-rising in alarm and voicing the question Sirius couldn't bear to ask.

"Not necessarily," Filius cautioned. "There was a timing mechanism built in. Should Mr. Potter lose his guardians, the folder would assess his state. If he was essentially all right, it would alarm just like always, and the Ministry would have ten days to collect him and place him with another family."

"And if they didn't?" Sirius asked tensely, already suspecting the answer. It had been exactly three weeks since the end of term.

Flitwick sighed. This was where things got a little gray. "You must remember, when these charms were set, Mr. Potter was little more than an infant. He absolutely could not be without a guardian. We fully expected that the situation would be resolved immediately

should it ever occur, and other precautions would not be necessary. However, since we were technically still at war, we planned for the worst, regardless. Unfortunately, this required many conditional qualifiers, and I'm afraid the folder's behavior might be slightly unpredictable once the ten-day mark passed.

"If a guardian had not been found at the end of two weeks, the folder was charmed to begin gathering information on possible candidates, to sort of help the Ministry along. If a guardian had not been assigned at the end of three weeks, this would be an indicator that the Ministry, for whatever reason, could not complete the task. The defensive magic would activate to hide him and whoever might helping him, regardless of his physical state, and it is very likely that the folder will begin the process of assigning a likely candidate itself."

Sirius' eyes widened in horror. Some brainless bits of parchment were going to arbitrarily assign his godson a guardian??? "How do we turn it off?" he demanded, finally finding his tongue.

"We cannot--at least not easily," Albus said, frowning in concentration. "I am on the Wizengamot, but even we need permission from the Minister's office before Harry's folder can be accessed. Unfortunately, Minister Fudge is in no mood to grant me favors."

Arthur suddenly brightened and snapped his fingers. "Percy!" he exclaimed. He got a few odd looks, so Arthur quickly explained. His middle son had gotten a job as an undersecretary in the Minister's office recently. They hadn't seen a lot of him lately because he'd been kept so busy, and he had all but stopped coming to the Burrow to assist with the warding. Still, Arthur was confident that Percy would help them. Harry was practically family after all.

Albus nodded, then turned to Flitwick again. "How do you predict the folder will proceed?"

Filius considered carefully before answering. "It will most likely compile a list of likely candidates from the people Mr. Potter sees regularly. There must be some sign of willingness from the foster family in question to Mr. Potter, and a sign of acceptance from him to them. I cannot, for example, gain guardianship by simply stating my

willingness. I must offer it to Mr. Potter in person, and he must accept my offer. Now, exactly what constitutes offer and acceptance is determined by the folder, and I can say that it will most likely become less precise and choosy as time goes on."

The witches and wizards in the room sat in silence for a few minutes, before Dumbledore abruptly shook himself out of his reverie. "All right," he said, clapping his hands briskly. "We have some time, but not a lot of it. Does anyone have any ideas about where he may be staying?"

"It can't be anywhere fancy," Sirius speculated, after a moment's thought. "He told me in a recent letter that he's doing things like sweeping floors and stocking shelves. There's nothing wrong with it, but jobs like that aren't exactly on the upper end of the wage scale. Unless he's working full-time, he can't be earning much more than pocket money, and even then it's dodgy."

"True, Black, unless he's supplementing his income."

Sirius and the others turned to face the Hogwarts Potion Master who was studying the transcript from earlier. "What are you on about?" Sirius asked impatiently.

"I just find his choice of wording here interesting," Snape said, tapping the parchment thoughtfully. "Engorgio!" he commanded, waving his wand at the parchment. When the paper was large enough for everyone to see, he transfigured a stand, and fastened the transcript to it. "Here," he said, tapping the paper with his wand.

Now, if you'll excuse me, the lady who requested my services this evening should be by any moment now, and I really need to get going.

The silence was deafening for a full fifteen seconds, then everyone started to talk at once.

"How dare you!" Arthur and Sirius roared.

"Now really Severus, that was uncalled for," Remus scolded.

"Harry is a good lad," Arabella screeched.

"If his family has abandoned him, as they appear to have done, Potter may not have a lot of choice in the matter!" Snape bellowed back. "And since he's decided to follow instructions for the first time in his miserable life, his options are not exactly varied. Of course you may be right," he said smirking at Black. "There's probably not be a thriving market for scrawny, undergrown boys. Perhaps he's merely peddling Muggle recreational drugs, or engaging in petty theft."

"Enough, Severus!" Albus said sternly, before Sirius finished sputtering, and things got completely out of hand. "I'm sure we all hope that Harry would consider that an emergency, and would have contacted someone if he found himself in such straits. Unfortunately," he added with a grimace, "as distasteful as this scenario may be, until we find Harry, we cannot discount it."

"Albus!" Sirius protested. "You can't believe Harry would do anything like that!"

"No, Sirius, I do not. However, I also didn't believe Harry would ever feel he needed to hide from me, and until today, I believed he was with his Muggle family. I admit it isn't the best lead we have, but we cannot leave any stone unturned. This possibility will be checked out with all the others."

"Besides, Paddy, he's almost fifteen. Prongs started really noticing girls at fifteen," Remus instigated shamelessly, enjoying the horrified look in his friend's eyes. Sirius was entirely too easy to get a rise out of.

"Yes, well. I suggest we adjourn for the night," Albus said, removing a pocket watch from his robe and noting the time. "Everyone try and get some sleep, and we will begin our search in the morning."

* Lines from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J. K. Rowling

Review this Story/Chapter

Chapter 23 - Night Thoughts (an interlude)

Saturday, July 22, 1995

Harry plumped his pillow, and reached for the blankets Janet had left for him. After one video, six stories, two rounds of goodnight hugs and kisses, a sip of water apiece, three "lullabies," quite a bit of rocking, and one half-finished conversation, Kitty and Becky were finally tucked into their beds and sleeping soundly.

They'd put up a fine fight, he'd give them that. There at the end, both of them had barely been able to keep their eyes open. Of course Harry couldn't say he was especially surprised. They were excited about their father's arrival, and had really wanted to stay awake and greet him, poor things.

He'd indulged them for a while, reading stories and granting their pleas of staying up "just a little longer." Unfortunately, Janet and her husband failed to appear, and as the hour grew later and later their eyelids had drooped lower and lower.

By the time he'd finally chivvied them upstairs they'd both developed a severe case of the "late night stares." Becky, especially, had been grumpy and out of sorts, wanting to be held and crying fretfully. Harry had been a little concerned about that, until he recalled Janet's parting warning about not letting Becky become overtired. Giving himself a mental slap, he decided he'd probably done just that. They'd had a very busy evening after all, and it was way, waaaaay, past both of their normal bedtimes.

Kitty had actually gone down easier than Becky, which Harry found surprising. Once he escorted them to their frilly domain, he'd expected the older girl to fuss about bedtime, and try to talk him into letting her stay up later than her sister just on general principles. Both girls were very sweet, but Kitty had a more intense nature than her sister. She could be almost argumentative at times. Becky, on the other hand, even in the midst of the "terrible twos" was usually more laid back and easy-going.

Usually...but not always.

There had been nothing "laid back" or "easygoing" about the youngest Wright tonight.

Harry rolled his eyes as he recalled the scene, grateful he hadn't had a large audience. Kitty had been quite enough, thanks, and no help at all. She'd given him an impatient look from her bed, as he tried to soothe Becky, I'm tired, can't you do something to shut her up? written all over her face. She hadn't said anything aloud, though, for which Harry was grateful. She'd obviously been through this before. When he hadn't been able to calm Becky immediately, she'd simply hidden her head under her pillow in an effort to muffle her sister's cries.

So, Harry had found himself essentially alone, holding Becky in the crook of one arm and murmuring nonsense to her, while frantically scanning the paper Janet had left him, and wondering if now would be a good time to summon help. He'd been both relieved and horrified when he'd finally found some advice: "If you have trouble getting Becky to sleep, rock her, rub her back, and sing to her..."

Sing?? He had blinked in disbelief, certain he must have misread it. Rocking and rubbing he could probably do, but singing??!

Yeah.

Right.

Let's traumatize the poor thing beyond all hope of recovery, shall we?

On the other hand, nothing else seemed to be working, and the paper hadn't steered him wrong yet...

A white glider rocker with a fluffy ruffled cushion sat near the foot of Becky's bed. He'd approached it with trepidation, afraid any attempt he made at calming her would only make her cry all the more, but it had actually worked! Becky hadn't seemed to mind his singing at all, proving, as far as Harry was concerned, that there really was no accounting for taste. In fact, once he'd realized that "rubbing" meant moving his hand gently up and down her back and stopped his

awkward patting ("Becky not a doggie!"), she'd settled down without too much fuss. Completely knackered from the evening's events, it hadn't been too long before she'd relaxed and her breathing had deepened.

Harry smiled gently recalling how she'd snuggled contentedly on his shoulder, then stopped short and tutted impatiently. Turning his attention back to the blankets, he scolded himself roundly for turning into a giant sap. Voldemort had been resurrected, and he could be hearing from the Ministry any minute now! He didn't have time to get all soppy and sentimental, for crying out loud!

Still... Harry finished smoothing out the covers and quirked an eyebrow. It had been two hours or more since Dobby's "visit." If the Ministry was going to send him an owl for the "improper use of magic," they were certainly taking their time about it. Indecisively, he picked up his bag, then set it down again, wondering if it was safe to change into his pajamas and get ready for bed.

Frowning slightly, Harry wandered over to the living room window, and scanned the sky for owls. He hadn't heard from the Improper Use of Magic Office, true, but he wasn't comfortable enough to relax yet. If he was going to be dragged away to the Ministry or to Hogwarts, he'd just as soon go in his regular clothes, thanks.

Sighing again, Harry crossed his arms on his chest and continued to scan the horizon. This lack of response was bloody confusing. When Dobby had cast his hover charm, summer before second year, the Ministry seemed to know immediately, and responded within seconds. It just didn't make any sense! Even if they decided to just give him another warning, he should have heard from them by now, shouldn't he?

Well, okay, maybe not, the teen admitted, recalling when he'd accidentally inflated Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge, summer before Third Year. The Ministry had been too busy chasing after Sirius, and trying to make sure Harry didn't run afoul of him. His little burst of accidental magic had been small potatoes in the grand scale of things, and largely ignored.

Could that be the case now? Did someone in the Ministry (besides Mr. Weasley) believe Voldemort was back? Harry twisted his mouth to one side. It was possible, but no. Given Minister Fudge's attitude a few weeks ago that didn't seem at all likely. Maybe an owl couldn't be delivered because he was currently in a Muggle's residence. Was there, perhaps, a letter from the esteemed Ms. Hopkirk waiting for him back at the Leaky Cauldron?

Frustrated, Harry raked a hand through his hair. He was still afraid of having a nightmare, and would dearly love to cast a Silencing Charm on the couch, but until he knew what was going on he didn't dare. Dobby's magic might have gone unnoticed this time, but he certainly didn't want to push his luck.

Although...

Harry turned from the window, and raised a speculative eyebrow. Dobby wasn't the only one who had cast magic this evening. Kitty had. Becky, too. Heck, even he had! He wondered briefly if the Ministry hadn't noticed because it was wandless magic, then dismissed the thought. Dobby had never had a wand. Harry hadn't used his wand either when Aunt Marge had finally provoked him beyond endurance. The Ministry had certainly cottoned on to those incidents soon enough! So why then? Was it because he wasn't on Privet Drive?

The boy frowned again, considering. That, actually, made the most sense. The protective wards around his uncle's former home had probably been set to snitch on him! Brilliant. Harry made an aggravated noise in the back of his throat, then wandered back to the couch and flopped down on it.

Actually, casting a Silencing Charm probably wasn't a good idea, anyway. On balance, it made more sense to risk the indignity of a nightmare. Bad dreams were easily explained at least, unlike magic. Even if his spell was overlooked by the Ministry, he reckoned Janet would have questions if she returned and found him mumbling soundlessly on the couch.

Besides, there was always a chance he wouldn't have bad dreams or visions at all. Voldemort had been strangely quiet of late, and physical exhaustion always helped keep his regular nightmares at bay. If the way he felt right now was an indicator, he didn't reckon he'd have too many "normal" nightmares tonight. That was a side benefit he'd discovered when he'd worked so hard those first few days at the Leaky Cauldron.

Smiling slightly, Harry leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. Scrubbing floors had nothing on chasing after Becky. She certainly earned the nickname "Snidget.*" Regular little streak of lightning, that one.

Kitty was challenging too, but in a different way. She was the one with the questions. She had grown rather quiet after the ball incident, and said very little throughout the movie and the subsequent bedtime ritual. She'd been so quiet in fact, he thought she had dropped off while he was getting Becky settled. As it turned out, she hadn't. When he'd finished tucking Rebecca in and turned to check on her before leaving, he discovered she had come out from under her pillow at some point, and had been watching him.

"You need to sleep, miss," he had said, straightening her covers, then sitting on the edge of her bed. "You can see your mum and dad in the morning."

Kitty had looked down a minute, then met his gaze again. "Are you going to tell?" she asked quietly, a strange blend of hope, fear and resignation in her sleepy brown eyes.

Harry had regarded her seriously for a long moment, unsure how to respond. What was he supposed to say to that for Heaven's sake? There was no sense playing dumb. He knew exactly what she was talking about. He just wasn't sure what the rules were in this case.

Squirming inwardly, he had grappled with the problem, cursing his own tendency to procrastinate. He'd been meaning to ask Tom how Muggleborn children were approached and integrated into Wizarding society for days now, he just hadn't known how to broach the subject. Before tonight, he had merely suspected that the Wright children

might be magical. The matter hadn't seemed all that urgent, so he kept putting it off. Now that his suspicions had been proven correct and he really needed some guidance, he was sitting here looking like a proper fool because he hadn't bothered to ask one tiny question.

Mercifully, Tom had come to his rescue once again, albeit indirectly. As Harry cast around for something to say, he found himself recalling an eerily similar conversation. It seemed he, too, had been uncertain, and in need of a little reassurance not so long ago...

"Are you going to tell him I'm here?" Harry still cringed when he thought about how his voice had quavered when he'd asked that. He'd sounded like a right twit. Fortunately, the other wizard hadn't held it against him.

"Why don't you tell me what happened first?" Tom had asked instead. Even though he clearly didn't understand Harry's reluctance to contact his headmaster, the old innkeeper hadn't made any snap judgments or accusations. He'd simply shown a willingness to listen, and offered Harry a chance to explain himself. That seemed like the best way to proceed now.

"Why don't you tell me about it first?" he had offered with a lopsided grin, hoping to put her at ease. Kitty had balked, however, evidently afraid of ridicule.

"You'll think it's dumb," she'd declared, crossing her arms and frowning sulkily.

"Try me," he'd invited, and at length, she had.

As Harry had expected, she was afraid of losing her parents' approval, but not for the reasons he imagined. Kitty wasn't nervous about admitting her magic. In fact, she'd reckoned her mum and dad would probably think it was pretty cool.

No, the problem was the night light of all things! When she had discovered her magic, Katrina had been sleeping with a full-sized lamp on at night, not a just tiny wall-light. This had evidently been a pet peeve of her mother's.

Consequently, when Janet discovered Kitty had awakened in a dark room, and managed to go back to sleep without raising a fuss, she had been delighted. She had made a special effort to praise her daughter, and let her know how pleased and proud she was. Not wanting to disappoint, Kitty had reluctantly agreed to give up the lamp in return for the two tiny night-lights she used now. "I figured if I had the ball, it would be okay," she'd said, yawning hugely and starting to slur her words. "I was afraid if I told Mom and Dad I still wanted my big light, they wouldn't be happy anymore."

Harry toed his trainers off and snuggled deeper into the corner of the couch, crossing his arms on his stomach, and tucking his feet beside him. Kitty had been relieved to have someone to confide in. She had told him how she hated the little night lights and the creepy shadows they cast on the walls and floor, and admitted that she'd nearly lost her nerve the first night she'd slept without her lamp. The magic had been purely accidental. She'd had no idea what she'd done to produce the ball in the first place, and wasn't sure she could do it again. She even wondered if she'd been dreaming. By the time she finished, she was teetering on the edge of sleep. "I just had to practice," she mumbled before dropping off. "It was sort of like...when I learned...to whistle..."

Yawning himself, Harry shook his head as he recalled the conversation. "Silly little git," he tutted fondly. He'd stayed at Kitty's side for a few minutes, making sure she was asleep and regarding her with a kind of amused astonishment.

That Kitty had told Becky when she hadn't confided in her parents seemed odd. Becky was a sweet little thing, but she was almost guaranteed to babble anything she knew. After thinking about it for a few minutes, however, Harry began to strongly suspect Kitty had been caught in the act by her baby sister. The two of them had shared a bedroom almost from the time Becky had been brought home from the hospital. It would have been difficult for Kitty to hide her magic indefinitely--especially if she used it to calm herself when the lights went out. And since Becky called the game "ball," Janet wouldn't suspect anything out of the ordinary, even if Becky had told her.

Harry grinned, struck with a thought. Was the name a lucky accident, or had Kitty dubbed it "ball" on purpose?

Everything made a twisted sort of sense actually. The only thing he didn't understand was why Kitty believed her mother would hold such a small thing against her. Anyone with eyes could see that Janet was mad about both her girls. Admittedly, Janet might not have liked leaving a lamp on all night, but Harry had no doubt that she would have, if Kitty truly needed it.

Maybe that just comes from not wanting to disappoint someone you look up to, Harry mused, closing his eyes, and letting his thoughts begin to drift. Almost immediately, his "argument" with Sirius and the others came to mind. He was guilty of much the same thing.

It was hard to describe the rush of apprehensive panic he'd felt earlier when he'd entered his room and spied Dumbledore's message. His first (admittedly childish) instinct had been to pretend he hadn't seen, and simply ignore it. On balance, he'd realized he was being stupid. Aside from sending the enchanted parchment to him in the first place, Dumbledore hadn't bothered to write before now. Whatever his headmaster wanted, it was probably important. Harry's heartbeat had quickened in anticipation. Had the Order figured out Voldemort's next move? Was it finally safe to visit his friends?

Not exactly sure what to say, he'd written "Professor Dumbledore?" and tapped the phoenix icon. It seemed wasteful to use an entire sheet of enchanted parchment that way, but it was the closest thing to knocking Harry could think of. He hadn't really been expecting an immediate reply, but Dumbledore had obviously been nearby. He'd been a little taken aback when the old wizard had written "Where have you been?"

Harry had blinked once, feeling like he was being reprimanded for sneaking in after curfew.

Since it was impossible to tell from the written words alone whether the question was angry or merely curious, he'd been unsure how to proceed. Hoping it was the latter rather than the former, he had

hesitated a bit before shrugging and writing "At work." Dumbledore knew he had a job this summer, but Harry didn't believe he'd ever shared the exact schedule he kept. His own curiosity had gotten the better of him, so he'd tacked on, "Is something wrong, sir?" before tapping the headmaster's phoenix again.

Things had steadily gone downhill from there. He'd tried to reassure Dumbledore that everything was under control and wound up in a row with his Godfather.

Harry frowned slightly, then pushed the thought aside. He really didn't want to deal with that now. He'd write Sirius a letter and try to explain tomorrow...assuming, of course that his godfather and the rest of the Order weren't waiting for him en masse when he went back to the Leaky Cauldron.

Meanwhile, it didn't look like anything was going to happen tonight. All things considered, it was probably safe to change into his pajamas and lay down properly, but Harry was too comfortable to move. As he sat there half dozing, he wondered idly what errand Professor Dumbledore had sent Dobby on.

Dobby.

Harry grinned sleepily. He couldn't forget Dobby. It really was amazing how powerful the little house-elf was. He had cleaned up all the clutter in Janet's living room in a snap--literally.

He had also sealed the portal leading to platform 9^¾...

And made a bludger go berserk...

All with Harry's best interests firmly in mind, of course.

Yeah, Dobby had come to see him on Privet Drive...

And the Hogwarts Hospital Wing...

And no one...

had...

noticed!

With a startled gasp, Harry's eyes snapped open and he sat bolt upright. It was true! No one had suspected a thing! By all evidence the little creature could even apparate inside of Hogwarts, where Apparation and Disapparation were supposed to be impossible!

As a matter of fact, the only time Dobby's magic had been detected was on Privet Drive the summer before Harry's second year! Dobby had shown up while the Dursleys had been entertaining Mr. and Mrs. Mason, potential clients of Grunnings Drills. Harry, of course, had been banished to his room for the duration of the dinner party, lest he do something "freakish" or "abnormal." He'd discovered the little house-elf in his room once he'd been sent upstairs, and things had quickly gotten out of hand.

Dobby had warned Harry about a plot (which he couldn't disclose the details of) and had tried to make Harry promise that he wouldn't return to Hogwarts (which Harry wouldn't do.) When he hadn't been able to twist a promise out of Harry, Dobby had resorted to more drastic measures. Before Harry could stop him, he'd scampered downstairs, and dumped Aunt Petunia's pudding on Mrs. Mason's head! Since Harry had been the only (known) magical being on the premises, he'd been blamed for the whole mess by the Dursleys and the Ministry of Magic!

Why that dirty little sneak! Harry fumed, indignation, disbelief, and a kind of grudging admiration warring for dominance. He couldn't believe it! Hogwarts non-apparation wards notwithstanding, if the Ministry had been aware of Dobby's hover charm on Privet Drive, why had they not noticed the little elf's comings and goings?

Why hadn't he been noticed at the train station, or at Hogwarts?

Harry got up again, and went back to the window to gaze at the still owl-less sky.

Dobby had always seemed a bit more...creative than others of his kind. Most of the house-elves Harry had observed were timid creatures, seemingly happy in their servitude, absolutely devoted to their masters, and easily cowed. Dobby, while not exactly defiant, seemed to be willing to at least consider bettering his lot. Of course considering how horribly he was treated by the Malfoys, there was probably nowhere to go but up.

One might think his attitude would be applauded and emulated, but Dobby was actually looked upon as something of an oddball by the other house-elves at Hogwarts. Most saw his status of "freed elf" as a badge of shame, not honor. Most of them would never have dared to do what Dobby did.

Harry had never thought about it before, but the whole thing was really kind of weird. Most wizards scarcely took notice of house-elves, if Ron's attitude was anything to go by. That seemed a bit...imprudent, given what the little creatures were capable of.

He shook his head distractedly. house-elf freedom was one of those knotty issues where "right" and "wrong" were sometimes hard to precisely define. Heaven knew his two best friends had gone around and around about it this past year. Ron didn't see a problem; Hermione thought the whole thing was horrible. Personally, Harry wasn't sure exactly what his feelings were. Normally he would agree that slavery was wrong, but after seeing the way Winky reacted when she was freed, he wasn't so sure. Perhaps it would be kinder to consider each elf on a case-by-case basis.

Coming back to the subject at hand, since house-elves were not typically seen as a threat by the majority of wizard kind, were they sort of "under the radar" then? Were normal protective wards not keyed to detect them?

Harry cocked his head, considering. It was possible, he supposed, and it would certainly explain why he hadn't gotten busted by the Ministry just now. They hadn't noticed because Dobby hadn't been trying to get him into trouble!

As for the magic done by Kitty, Becky and himself, it was probably too weak to be detected without someone specifically watching for it. That little ball was cute and all, but there hadn't been a lot of power behind it.

Whoa. Harry felt a little bowled over. That cuts it. I definitely need to talk to Hermione! She probably knows loads about house-elves, what with S.P.E.W. and all. In the meantime, I should probably get ready for bed, he thought, after cringing at the time. He went to retrieve his pajamas, toothpaste, and toothbrush out of his bag, planning as he did so. If he left late enough tomorrow morning, he could stop and ring her up on his way back to the Leaky Cauldron. If not, he supposed he could try later, or send her an owl.

As he brushed his teeth, Harry found himself speculating on Dobby's errand for Dumbledore again. It had been a little weird when he popped in like that...and what was it he said?

"Dobby is glad to see that Harry Potter is not hurt! Harry Potter is being very naughty--causing much worry at Hogwarts!"

Yes, that was it. Causing much worry. But why? Harry wondered, peering into the mirror above the powder room sink. I told them I was all right. Why didn't they believe me? Frowning, Harry flipped through his parchment "conversation" with Dumbledore and Sirius again. He was missing something, somewhere.

"Harry, we know you aren't in Australia with the Dursleys. Tell me where you are, and I'll have you brought to Hogwarts until all this can be sorted out."

Wait! Harry nearly choked on his toothpaste. When he'd blabbed to Dumbledore about his uncle's house being for sale, his headmaster must have done what Harry himself had not, and discovered that the Dursleys had moved out of country! If that was true, Dumbledore probably assumed he had accompanied them, Harry realized with a miserable groan. You're an idiot, Potter, truly! It's a wonder you manage to dress yourself in the morning!

There was that procrastination thing again. Or maybe this time it was just hard feelings. With Kitty and Becky, he had actually been meaning to take an action. With his relatives... Harry rinsed his toothbrush and shrugged. Since he never planned to darken their doorway again, he simply hadn't bothered. It was obvious, now, that this hadn't been the best decision he'd ever made. If he'd just taken the time to track down where his aunt and uncle went, maybe this could have been headed off, somehow.

He wondered if he should have just kept quiet, but even that was no guarantee. With Voldemort back, Dumbledore probably would have checked up on him, even if the Ministry couldn't be bothered, and Mrs. Figg! She did always pop 'round a few times during the summer--usually wanting him to help her with some small chore. Was that just an excuse so Aunt Petunia wouldn't suspect? Perhaps he hadn't been as isolated as he'd first thought.

Back to the matter at hand, clearly, someone had gone to the Dursleys' new home, probably to set new wards or bring him back to Britain, and had found out he wasn't there. Harry grinned impishly, enjoying a mental image of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia trying to think up a plausible explanation for his absence, then sobered again. He'd only wanted to protect his friends. He'd thought he was doing as he'd been told. Now it looked like all he'd managed to do was cause a lot of fuss and bother. Had he successfully escaped his headmaster's notice all this time because they'd been looking in the wrong place? Was that why everyone was so angry?

And Dobby! Dobby knew where he was! So did Fawkes, come to think of it, but Harry wasn't sure how completely the phoenix was able to communicate. Dobby was the bigger problem right now. He had found Janet's house, after all. Had the little elf not told anyone? Was that why no one had come? Thinking quickly, Harry tried to remember exactly what Dobby had said...

"Dobby has not come to fetch Harry Potter. Dobby is running an errand for Master Dumbledore."

Was that it? Had Dobby come around to check up on him without being told to? Harry frowned calculatingly. Would Dobby feel

obligated to tell Dumbledore about Janet's house if he'd simply stopped by of his own accord? Possibly, but it didn't seem likely. Harry didn't get the feeling that house-elves routinely discussed their personal lives with their masters.

Of course this was Dobby and Professor Dumbledore being considered. If Dumbledore asked Dobby directly, then yes. Harry rolled his eyes. He could just imagine that conversation...

(Excited bounce, big smile) Yes, Master Dumbledore, sir, Dobby knows where Harry Potter is. Harry Potter is fine, Master Dumbledore. Dobby saw Harry Potter just this evening.

(Benevolent smile, eye twinkle) Splendid, Dobby, now would you please tell me where Harry is?

(Ear droop, mournful expression) Harry Potter is in London, sir, but Harry Potter said that Harry Potter must stay. Harry Potter told Dobby he could not leave because Harry Potter is sitting on babies...

Oh, great. Now what do I do? Harry felt a little shiver of dread as he dried his toothbrush, suddenly feeling a lot less sure of himself. The idea of Dumbledore bringing his formidable power and network of colleagues against him was nothing short of terrifying. What would happen when he was found? Would he become a ward of the Ministry? As such, could Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic have him committed to St. Mungos? Would his abandonment be splashed all over the Daily Prophet tomorrow, so that witches and wizards could read every sordid detail?

Harry began to think that heading back to the Cauldron when Janet came back was sounding better and better all the time. She wouldn't like it, but he could tell her something. Perhaps that he didn't feel well. That wasn't too far from the truth, really. His stomach was jumping queasily, probably from all his nervous fretting.

He thought about changing back into his clothes, then decided not to bother. There was nothing indecent about his sweat pants. And who was going to care what he was wearing, anyway? Rattled, he shook his head distractedly, unsure what to do next. Perhaps he could make

his apologies to the merchants of Diagon Alley and Mr. Lancaster, then resume the "night shift" at the Leaky Cauldron.

I'm too fuzzy-headed to work this out now, I'll think about it in the morning. He walked over to the window for one last look around, then settled on the couch to wait.

Sirius Black sighed moodily as he glanced at the items laid out on Arabella's coffee table. Nymphadora Tonks, another Ministry Auror in the Order had been kind enough to watch the place while he and Remus and Arabella went to Hogwarts.

Amazingly, everything they'd left out was still in place. It wasn't that he didn't trust Tonks, but she could be a bit of a klutz. At the very least he'd expected the container of floo powder to be upset, but it was still sitting on the table, ready for firecalls. A piece of Flitwick's parchment and a quill lay beside it, (message already written) and the mirror in Arabella's living room could have been mistaken for a landscape shot of number four Privet Drive.

Everything was ready for the attack that was surely coming. When the Dark Wizards showed up, the entire Order could be warned in a matter of seconds.

Now came the hard part. Now came the waiting.

Sirius sighed again, feeling restless. He had always hated waiting. James had too. Remus, perhaps because of his special circumstances, was more patient and accepting, and seemed to tolerate it better.

That or he faked it awful damn well.

Even back at Hogwarts when the Marauders had sneaked around, setting up pranks, they'd favored the direct approach. Jokes that had to be chanced upon by some unsuspecting soul were fun every now and then, but it was agony hiding quietly and waiting for the payoff.

"What are you thinking of?" a quiet voice asked, startling him. Turning toward the sound, he saw Remus was awake on the couch, propped on one elbow, and regarding him curiously.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," he chided. The werewolf shrugged.

"I did, a bit," he said, sitting up and stretching. "I guess I'm still a little keyed up from earlier. So, what were you thinking of?"

"Waiting. And James. And Hogwarts," Sirius said, giving the extremely edited version.

Remus grinned fondly. He understood. "Yeah, I never could figure out how you managed, as twitchy as you both were." His amused gaze flicked to Sirius. "And still are."

Sirius stopped pacing for a second and mock-glared at him. "Shut it, you."

Remus chuckled abruptly, making Sirius raise a questioning eyebrow. "What's funny?" he asked.

Remus shook his head. "Nothing really," he said, indicating the mirror where number four Privet Drive still sat, serene and unattacked. He noted absently that a lawn service must have been by--the grass had been cut at some point. "All this nervous waiting just reminds me of when Lily was expecting Harry. Poor James, I never saw him in such a state."

Sirius grinned, thinking back with some effort. As much as he wanted to take Harry in, a small part of him actually dreaded it. Harry would naturally want him to tell everything he remembered about James and Lily, their friendship, and their time at Hogwarts.

Unfortunately, even now, he still suffered from gaps in his memory. It was a side-effect of Azkaban, he supposed. Twelve years with the Dementors. He could recall bad images in a second, almost as if they'd been burned into his brain. Good times were harder to dredge up, and even when he did sometimes they were tainted with negative thoughts.

His clearest memory of James and Lily's wedding day, for instance, was not the excitement of the occasion, or ceremony itself, or the party afterwards. If he concentrated, he could recall those, but the thing that stood out most happened later, after James and Lily were safely off on their honeymoon, the party was over and everyone was gone. He had been at home, wondering what to do with the rest of his evening, when it had suddenly struck him how the day's events had altered life as he knew it.

It had been a little disconcerting to tell the truth. He wasn't afraid of losing James' friendship per se, they'd been through too much for that, but he couldn't deny that there had been a subtle shift in the structure of their relationship. As much as he might wish otherwise, things would never be the same again.

As happy as he was for James, and as fond as he was of Lily, their marriage had ended a cherished chapter in his life and heralded the beginning of a new one. The trouble was, Sirius had liked the way things had been, and was a little unsure about this new and uncharted territory that stretched out ahead of him. So for a few minutes, while no one was around to see, he had allowed himself to grieve his "loss" and come to terms with "sharing" his best friend.

The bad thing was, that little episode had lasted all of twenty minutes. Half an hour at most. That was what he should be struggling to remember, but no. Thanks to Azkaban it had been forced into the spotlight, so to speak, while an absolutely glorious day had been shoved into the shadows.

Thankfully, it seemed to be getting better with time. He had noticed improvements since his escape from prison. Being the guinea pig for Snape's Memory Potion a few days ago seemed to have helped the process along as well. Not that he planned to tell the slimy git, of course. Well, okay. Maybe anonymously. Ten or twenty years from now.

He could now recall how James had sent howlers out with the news of his impending fatherhood. They'd gleefully shouted out his message before shredding themselves into confetti, and disappearing

in a flash of celebratory fireworks. He, Remus, and Peter had all been pleased and happy, in a "better you than me" kind of way. They'd spoken rather candidly after the fact, and agreed amongst themselves that if anyone could manage, Prongs could. He had always been a rather "take-action" sort of fellow, after all. Besides being the de facto leader of the Marauders, he was usually more than a match for any challenge school, or work, or life itself could throw at him.

Unfortunately, James' tendency to tackle things head-on had not served him well in this instance, especially when Lily hit a few rough patches during her pregnancy. Sirius sighed again. Again, it was the stressful moments he remembered with great clarity. First kicks, the discovery that Lily was carrying a boy, and the general happy feeling of the time were less distinct--like he was trying to see them through a dirty window.

James had once confessed privately to Sirius that the whole process was baffling and terrifying, and he felt like the most useless person on the planet. This wasn't a game to win, an opponent to outwit, or a target he could blast with a well-aimed curse. It was, in fact, primarily Lily's job. He had been unwillingly thrust into the role of 'helpless observer', which he absolutely detested. He could commiserate, and try to offer comfort and reassurance when she was tired or ill or in pain, but there was nothing he could really do.

Poor Lily tried her best to reassure him, telling him again and again that his presence and support were helpful, and that he was doing something. She'd been fairly patient with his almost hand-wringing concern, but as time went on, her temper grew shorter. Once, as she neared her due date, James had asked her if she was okay one too many times in the space of five minutes and found himself running from a fierce volley of hexes.

Sirius grinned softly at the memory, then realized Remus was still watching him. "Yeah, poor James," he agreed, shaking his head fondly, pulling himself back to the present, and picking up the thread of conversation. "The silly git had no idea what he was getting himself into."

The werewolf made a little noise of agreement. "The phrase 'fish out of water' comes to mind," he said with a grin. "They managed, though."

"Yes, they did..." Sirius said, before trailing off into thought again. Harry hadn't exactly been "planned." For some inexplicable reason, the Potters' precautionary charms had failed, so he had taken everyone by surprise. Since the charms were usually very reliable, no one had suspected the truth. When severe fatigue and incessant vomiting finally drove Lily to the mediwizard, she'd been quite sure it was just a "bad stomach bug."

James had been understandably stunned at the news, but recovered quickly. The timing wasn't great, with he and Lily both in post-graduation schooling and Voldemort on the rampage, but he was sure things would work out. They'd always known they wanted children after all. They were just getting an earlier start than anticipated.

By the time he'd sent out his "announcements" he was quite taken with the idea. Lily said he'd gone out to look at toy brooms (can't buy this early, something better might come out by the time he can use it!) and was trying his best to talk her into a Quidditch-themed nursery.

"Do you remember anything about that time?" Remus finally asked, eyeing his friend uncertainly as though afraid he might be intruding on something private.

Sirius nodded slowly, grinning at the realization. Lily's pregnancy and Harry's babyhood had been memories that had stayed with him, in spite of Azkaban. It seemed odd since Harry had been the absolute center of his world. Still was, really. Maybe it was because both of those circumstances had had their share of tense moments. Even if he hadn't been sent to Azkaban, he never would have forgotten the day when routine prenatal testing had turned up an "unexplained anomaly in the fetus."

The mediwizard had been quick to assure them that their baby was healthy and developing normally, but the damage had been done. James and Lily tried to put on a brave front, and claim that "anomaly"

didn't necessarily mean "bad", but Sirius knew they had both been scared witless. They hadn't been truly reassured until three months later when their son was born. Tiny, wild-haired, and absolutely perfect, Harry had possessed the usual number of fingers and toes, and hadn't seemed different from any of the other babies in the hospital nursery. Well, besides the fact that he was Sirius' godson, and therefore the sweetest, smartest, most wonderful child ever born.

Since there weren't any obvious problems, the "anomaly" had been noted and "tagged for later study" when Harry was older. Sirius frowned thoughtfully, wondering if anything had ever come out of that. As far as he could tell, Harry was perfectly fine. Perhaps the lab had made a mistake, or the matter had been taken care of.

"He's all right, you know," Remus said out of nowhere, almost as if he'd read Sirius' mind.

Sirius blinked as he was pulled back to the present. "I s'pose," he mumbled gruffly, still a little miffed by Harry's behavior.

"Sirius." Remus' voice was stern now. "You said it yourself. Whatever else Harry may be, he's not stupid. Come on, Snape was just trying to yank your chain," he said, regarding his friend with amused amber eyes. "And from where I stand, he's succeeding."

"What? No way!" Sirius denied vehemently.

"Uh-huh," Lupin responded, looking and sounding supremely unconvinced. "Look, I don't pretend to understand exactly what Harry's reasoning is, but if Dumbledore told him to stay away..." Remus let the rest of the sentence drop and shrugged. "He's probably hiding because he thinks that he's protecting us."

Well, yes, that makes sense, Sirius conceded, nodding. He could almost picture Harry looking earnestly up at him with those big green eyes of his.

"Look, I'm sorry I got short with you, but if I'd really needed help, I would have asked for it. I'm all right, okay?"

His godson's words had been a plea for trust that Sirius found difficult to grant. He made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat, and raked a hand through his hair. "He says he's okay, and I want to believe him..." he trailed off and spread his hands helplessly, unable to put his feelings into words.

Lupin's shoulders slumped dejectedly. Yes, he thought he might understand what Sirius was trying to say. How were they supposed to believe the boy when he'd withheld such important news? What else might he be keeping from them? And perhaps most disturbing, exactly how did Harry define "okay?"

"Look," he finally said, trying to reassure Black, "I admit Harry's choices this summer have been a bit off-putting, but I did teach him for a year, remember? His approach to problem solving may not be as orderly and methodical as his friend Hermione's, but it's solid all the same. Even when he got an answer wrong, I could always follow his line of reasoning. That said, I truly believe there's more going on here than simple teenage rebellion, although that may be part of it."

"I'm just afraid he's settling for substandard accommodations, or else working himself to the bone to get by," Sirius admitted painfully. "It doesn't make sense, Moony! What kid doesn't consider being left at the train station an emergency for crying out loud?!"

Remus' expression darkened. "A kid who's had as bad or worse happen before, I reckon," he growled angrily. "What we've learned about his aunt and uncle goes a long way towards explaining that." He blew out a little breath and shook his head, then blinked as though he'd thought of something. "Wait... Remember what Arthur said a few days ago? About how Harry was alone at the train station, and Molly had to show him how to get to the Hogwarts Express? Who's to say they didn't just leave him there to fend for himself, then? Maybe he made his own way to Surrey when Dursley didn't show up because he didn't consider that kind of behavior odd."

Sirius' eyes darkened, and flashed angrily. It really was a good thing the Dursleys were in Australia, because if they had still been on Privet Drive... "If that's true, we're damn lucky he met up with the

Weasleys," he said a little shakily. "Eleven and alone at King's Cross...God, anything could have happened!"

Remus didn't answer immediately, so Sirius looked back in his direction to make sure his friend hadn't nodded off again. He hadn't, but Sirius noted he had a very sad and far away look in his expressive amber eyes. "Moony?" he asked finally. "Something wrong, mate?"

"Something else you mean?" Remus asked with a ghost of a smile. "No, I was just thinking. I considered trying to get custody of Harry, did you know that?"

Sirius shook his head.

"Yeah," Remus went on with a humorless little laugh. "I thought about it quite a bit after I finally started to get over my own grief. I even went so far as to talk to a solicitor. I knew how spiteful and jealous Petunia could be."

"So what happened?" Sirius asked, frowning in confusion.

Lupin shrugged. "I let him talk me out of it. There were several good arguments. Harry had been placed in a very comfortable home, while I was just getting by. I couldn't swear I'd be able to provide a good home because it's always been hard for me to get or keep a job. No charges or complaints against the Dursleys had ever been brought before the Ministry. I'm close to useless near the full moon, and dangerous when I transform. I also had no legal claim on him." He broke off and arched an ironic eyebrow. "Frankly, my case didn't stand a chance, and even if we had uncovered some evidence. The Ministry doesn't have a very high opinion of half-breed freaks, you know."

He'd meant to say that in a joking manner, but failed miserably. Rising, he walked over to the mirror, frowning angrily at the house shown there. "It seemed so hopeless I gave up without a fight. You don't know how much I wish that I'd pressed forward," he mumbled sadly. "Even if I lost, there would have been an investigation. Perhaps Harry's circumstances would have come to light! Who

knows? His relatives might have given up their guardianship willingly! Harry might not have been placed with me, but at least he would have been away from them!

At length, Sirius walked over and put a comforting hand on Remus' shoulder. He was disappointed to learn that yet another opportunity to "save" Harry had slipped away, but he found he couldn't really be angry with Moony. He had a point, after all, the idiots at the Ministry would have fought with everything they had to keep "The Boy Who Lived" from going to live with a werewolf. And really, there were no guarantees that Harry would have been placed with a loving, magical family. If Moony's case had failed altogether, and Harry had been forced to remain with his relatives, would the litigation have improved his lot, or worsened it?

"Should've, could've, would've, Moony," he said with a sigh, amazed to find himself in the role of "calm, reasonable one" for a change. "You aren't the only one who messed up. Do you think I'm proud of the way I played right into Pettigrew's hands? When I saw Harry was alive that night, I should have never left his side. I should have gone with Hagrid, confessed to Dumbledore, done whatever I had to do, but I was blinded by grief and anger and ran off half cocked. All I wanted was find Peter and wring his worthless neck," he sighed again. "But that's all water under the bridge now, isn't it?"

"Yes," Remus agreed. "We can't change the past. All we can do is find him, and start trying to make things better for him somehow...provided he forgives us for being such bloody idiots."

"So he started talking about torches, and I was completely missing the point because to me a torch is a big piece of wood with fire on top, right? He finally realized I didn't have a clue, and said 'You know, miss. Little hand-held light what runs on batteries.' Turns out he wanted a flashlight, for Pete's sake! I felt like such an idiot."

Stephen Wright grinned, amused by his wife's animated storytelling as they walked up the street. Carrying his bag in one hand, he slung his other arm across her shoulders, feeling the cares of the day begin to fall away.

His trip over from the States hadn't exactly been the smoothest. Delays, turbulence, and what seemed to be a million little headaches and annoyances had dogged the flight all the way across the Atlantic. By the time they'd finally arrived, he'd been tired, stiff and irritable, and quite frankly in no mood to deal with two cranky, exhausted children.

As such, he'd approached the terminal with an odd mixture of eagerness and trepidation. He'd missed Jannie and the girls, of course, and was excited about seeing them again, but as late as it was, Kitty and Becky would probably be bone-weary and grouchy to boot.

He figured he'd enter the gate area and find Janet buried under a pile of squalling or sleeping children, but to his surprise she'd been alone. He'd been in the airport for maybe two minutes before she'd spotted him and he'd found himself with an armful of gleefully excited wife. He'd hugged her close and kissed her soundly, spinning her around for good measure before noticing that no one else was clamoring for his attention.

The kids were missing.

Jannie, amazing, thoughtful person that she was, had managed to find a babysitter. Sure, he was a little disappointed, but honestly, everything went much smoother. Once they'd retrieved his bag, they'd set off to find a train back into the city.

That was the biggest adjustment he could foresee, actually. Being without a car was going to take a little getting used to. He'd never been an active patron of public transportation in the past. In this instance, they'd decided that the car would probably be an expense they could do without. They'd reasoned that they could always rent a car if they wanted to take a trip, or buy one if they decided they couldn't do without.

Steve grinned, remembering how his wife had matter-of-factly navigated their way back to London from the airport. Janet seemed to

be adjusting well, and the train ride from the airport hadn't been bad at all. Maybe this would be okay.

He was curious about the babysitter, though. Jannie was usually very particular about who she left the kids with. He wouldn't have thought she could have known anyone long enough to trust them yet. She and the girls hadn't been in country all that long, and by the sound of things she'd been unpacking most of the time.

"So, when did you meet her?" he asked, when his wife finished her story.

Janet frowned uncomprehendingly. "Who?"

"The sitter."

Janet grinned. "I already told you about him. It's Sparky--the same kid who works at that little pub and inn over there."

Steve squinted into the shadows. "Where?"

"Over there," Janet pointed vaguely across the street and to the right. "The Leaky Cauldron." When Steve continued to look perplexed, she shrugged. "Doesn't look like Tom lights it up at night. You'll be able to see it tomorrow. It's not a place that exactly stands out, anyway. Just to warn you, it looks like a dive, but the inside's nice. Food's good, too."

Steve nodded. He'd been to a few places like that. "I'm surprised the kids are allowed in," he remarked frankly, still trying to see this mysterious building.

"Tom has his main area divided into dining room and bar," Janet said, describing the setup with her hands. Steve wondered, not for the first time, if it was possible for his wife to speak without gesturing. "He allows Kitty and Becky to come in the dining room, but they aren't allowed in what's considered the 'pub area'."

Steve nodded noncommittally. "How much farther is it?" he wondered curiously.

"Around that corner and down a little ways," Janet replied, pointing ahead. "I'm not quite finished with the unpacking, but most of it is done. We should have plenty of time to finish up and see some sights before I have to start my new job."

"I told you to wait, and I'd help you," he chided.

"I know, but I had to set up the bedrooms and the kitchen, and it isn't like I had a lot of pressing demands on my time," Janet returned with a shrug. "My only real commitment has been visiting the Leaky Cauldron every two days or so to buy pumpkin juice."

"So you mentioned," Steve said, recalling the last few e-mails he'd received. "I can't believe they'd like such a thing. It sounds awful--like liquid squash."

"It's spiced--tastes similar to pumpkin pie," Janet clarified. "Tom makes it in-house. He also makes a concoction called Butterbeer, which is very good. I've never tasted anything quite like it, but it sort of reminds me of cream soda. So far we've just had it chilled, but Sparky says it's served warm in cold weather. Should be interesting to try."

"Sounds like you two have really hit it off."

"Yes, he's very sweet. He's been helping me learn 'English' and sort of showing me the ropes," Janet shrugged. "It's hard to explain. Remember when we met?" she asked suddenly, seeming to veer off subject.

"How could I forget?" he responded, grinning.

"No, I mean how we were almost immediately comfortable with each other. How we sort of skipped that whole awkward 'sound each other out' phase?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I'm sure lots of couples discuss the division of household chores and acceptable discipline for hypothetical children on their second date..."

That earned him an elbow in the ribs.

"Smart aleck."

"That's me," he agreed cheerfully.

Janet shrugged. "It's the same sort of thing. We all just warmed up to each other right away. Me. Him. The kids. I can't explain it, any more than I can explain us, but it's been a blessing. Here we are. Ah. Good. Looks like he got them down," she said, noting the quiet and dimly lit state of the house.

"Did you think he'd have trouble?"

"What, you didn't believe me earlier? Your kids have been bouncing off the walls all day today, buddy! Tranquilizers were beginning to sound like a good idea."

"Oh, so they're my kids now?" he said with mock indignation.

"That's right. I only claim them when they're being sweet and wonderful."

"You must not claim them much."

"Ha, ha, aren't we the witty one?" Janet mumbled distractedly as she fumbled with the door then finally opened it with a flourish. "Welcome home! The house was clean when I left, but I make no guarantees about its condition at this point in time."

Actually, Steve thought, as he entered and looked curiously around, the house looked pretty good. In the soft glow of a single lamp, he could see Jannie had arranged their living room furniture in much the same way it had been in their old house back in the States. There were a few boxes stacked off to the side, still waiting to be dealt with--mostly his things, he noted wryly.

"I didn't want you to miss out," Janet grinned catching what he was looking at. "Our bedroom's upstairs at the end of the hall on the left--oh, for Heaven's sake!"

"What?" Steve asked softly, watching curiously as his wife bustled over to the couch. Setting down his bag, he walked over to her. His eyes widened a bit when he realized there was actually a person sitting on one end of the couch. The boy was curled into a little ball and tucked into a corner, while his bedding was laid out on the other side.

"Looks like someone fell asleep reading," Janet whispered, carefully working one of her favorite novels out of Harry's limp hand. "Here," she said, handing the book to her husband. "He's going to have a crick in his neck if he sleeps this way all night."

Steve accepted the book, automatically fishing his plane ticket out of his shirt pocket and using it as a bookmark. He had to admit, the kid was a lot younger than he'd been expecting. When Jannie said he had a job at a pub, he'd figured late teens at the earliest. This kid wasn't even shaving yet!

She was right, though. The boy's head was lolling forward in a most awkward manner. If they let him be, he'd be in serious pain tomorrow morning.

Setting the book on the coffee table, he watched bemusedly while his wife clucked her tongue and talked softly to the boy on the couch. She was trying to wake him just enough so he'd move, then immediately go back to sleep.

Everything was okay until she gently shook his shoulder. As soon as she touched him, he gasped and stiffened reflexively.

Janet got a classic "damn, I didn't mean to do that" expression on her face, when his eyes popped open in alarm. Still mostly asleep, he blinked stupidly, his brain trying to catch up with his body. Quickly, Jan began to talk again, trying to reassure him before he awoke completely.

"Easy, Sparky, it's just Janet," she soothed. "I didn't mean to scare you, but you need to lay down. You're going to get a stiff neck if you stay like that. Can you move for me, sweetie?"

Sparky made a little noise of protest, but seemed to understand what she wanted. "M'sorry. Did I wake you?" he asked sleepily.

"Sshh. You didn't wake anyone, we just got home. Come on now," Janet coaxed. "Lay down here on the pillow. That's right. You did a good job making your bed. Seems silly not to use it."

While Steve watched, amused, she gently herded the boy into a more normal sleeping position, then covered him snugly with a blanket. "You think he was waiting up for us?"

"Maybe," Janet said, absently rubbing Harry's back. "He could have just gotten interested in the book." She examined her charge critically, then nodded. "I think he's sleeping again."

"I'm surprised," Steve commented frankly as he climbed the stairs. "I wouldn't have thought you were talking about someone that young."

"He's pretty mature for his age in a lot of ways," Janet responded. "Sometimes when I'm talking to him I forget he's just a kid. Other times he'll say or do something that has me wondering if his social education was lacking."

Steve snorted. "That's pretty typical. How old is he, anyway?"

"He'll be fifteen at the end of the month," Janet said, glancing into Kitty and Becky's room as they passed. The girls were sleeping peacefully, Steve noted, watching as his wife walked inside, straightening covers and kissing each girl on the cheek. When they continued down the hall, and entered the master suite, Janet picked up her thought. "Becky's going to let me help her make a cake for him." She grinned impishly.

"Oh, is she now?"

"Mmm-hmm. But just between you and me, I think she's more interested in 'helping' him blow out his candles."

Steve grinned. Oh, yes. His youngest daughter loved candles. "And let's not forget her expertise in the fine art of present-opening," he teased. He turned his attention to his suitcase for a few minutes, throwing his dirty clothes in the basket, and gathering his toiletries before getting ready for bed. He had just finished brushing his teeth when he noticed Janet had gotten awfully quiet. He wondered if she'd gone to sleep, but no. She was staring out the window looking rather troubled. "What?" he asked, moving up behind her, and embracing her from behind.

Janet shrugged. "I was just thinking about something that happened a few days ago. I figured Sparky already had plans for his birthday, so I asked him if he'd mind an extra cake."

"And?"

"Well, that's just it. It was nothing he explicitly said or did. He just looked sort of surprised for a second, like he really hadn't been expecting that. I thought at first that I'd messed up again, and maybe kids don't have birthday cakes here in England, then he smiled at me."

"Seems like a normal response to me, Jan," Steve said, not seeing what the matter was. "What was he supposed to do? Tell you to take a hike?"

Janet wrinkled her nose at him. "Of course not. But he smiled, right? Really smiled. Then he caught himself and got all embarrassed. I was curious about his reaction, but when I asked, he just shrugged and said that his aunt and uncle had never been keen on celebrating their birthdays, or his."

It took a couple of seconds for Steve to grasp her implication. When he did, he stared at her incredulously. "So you think he's never had a birthday party?"

"I suspect that, yes," Jan corrected meticulously, unconsciously donning her "programmer" hat. "I also suspect that he feels he's too old to want something so 'childish', hence his embarrassment."

She met her husband's gaze, looking a little uncertain. "We don't have a lot of time to plan, but I thought I'd talk to Tom--see who his friends are. We could have a little surprise party here or in one of the parlors at the Leaky Cauldron if we can't contact anyone." She stopped a minute, then shrugged and went on, finally getting to the "why" part. "He's helped me more than he realizes these last few days, and I'd just like to do something nice for him."

"Well, when you put it that way, how can I say no? Not that I was planning to anyway." Steve thought a minute then asked, "What about the aunt and uncle? Wouldn't they know who his friends are and how to contact them?"

Janet shrugged again. "Possibly, but I've never met them so I don't know for sure. It's like they're some kind of paranoid anti-social recluses or something. Sparky seems to come and go at will with little or no interference from them." She stopped and snorted disdainfully. "Tom's more of a guardian to him than they are from what I can see."

Steve was beginning to be concerned in spite of himself. Jannie was a passionate sort, no question, but she usually wasn't one to get this spun up over nothing, and she almost never spoke ill of people she'd never met. He frowned a little and studied his wife appraisingly. This had obviously been eating at her for a while.

"If you think something's wrong, isn't there someone you could contact?" he finally asked. "Child Protective Services, maybe?"

"I have no proof. What am I supposed to say, 'I have a bad feeling about this?'" Janet flared in frustration, before stopping and visibly reining herself in. Steve was not the one she was angry with. "Tom and I spoke a little this evening when I went to pick Sparky up, but the girls were there, so I didn't want to say too much," she continued more calmly. "Maybe I can go back and finish the conversation now that you're here. It could be nothing. I could be misreading the whole situation."

It's possible, but you don't believe that for a minute--and neither do I--but that's a problem we'll work on tomorrow, Steve thought as they turned out the lights and climbed into bed. "C'mere," he said, reaching out an arm and pulling her close. "Everything will come out in the wash, you'll see," he said, giving her a little kiss. "And just in case I forgot to mention it, I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

* For anyone who may not know, a Snidget is a little bird. The modern Quidditch snitch was modeled after it. Reference: Quidditch Through The Ages by Kennilworthy Whisp (J.K. Rowling)

Chapter 24 - Conversations

Saturday, July 22, 1995

"Hermione! You have an owl!"

"Thanks, Mum!" Hermione responded, marking her place, and setting her book aside. She paused just long enough to grab her little bag of owl treats out of her trunk, then hurried downstairs. Who could have sent it? she wondered, as she turned into the kitchen. Her mum and dad knew Hedwig and Pig, so it probably wasn't from Ron or Harry, and it was a bit early yet for Hogwarts letters. Hermione frowned a bit, considering. Perhaps Ron had borrowed Errol or Hermes again.

"Here he is, dear," Greg Granger said from behind his newspaper, gesturing towards a larger-than-average bird who looked like he was built for power and speed. "From Hogwarts, isn't he?"

Hermione looked again, and noticed the school seal that the owl was wearing. Ah. Apparently it was her school letter, after all. Perhaps they were being sent early this year.

"Thank you," she said, offering some owl treats. Her mum or dad, she noticed, had already provided some water.

The owl hooted appreciatively, then held out his leg. He seemed to be in a hurry, but did not immediately depart when she untied her letter. Hermione wondered about this for a second, then nodded and quickly opened the envelope. He must have been instructed to wait for a response.

Dear Miss Granger,

I have a question for you concerning Mr. Harry Potter. Do not be alarmed, he is not in trouble, I am merely requesting some information. Since you and Mr. Ronald Weasley are his closest friends, you seemed to be the logical ones to ask.

In your opinion, how is Mr. Potter doing? Some questions have come up as to how well he is coping with recent events. Mr. Potter assures

me that he is not suffering any undue stress, but I find myself desiring a second opinion. He sometimes has a tendency to downplay his own troubles.

I have instructed Hercules to wait for your reply. If you would kindly respond immediately to this post, it would be very much appreciated. Thank you, and enjoy the rest of your holiday.

Albus Dumbledore
Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Hermione read and re-read the letter, frowning a bit. It certainly wasn't what she had been expecting.

She wondered why the headmaster was asking her, when he said he'd just spoken to Harry. Didn't that imply that he'd seen Harry in person? Well, no, she allowed, reading the sentence again. He said "Mr. Potter assures me." Harry could have done that in a letter, I suppose. Still, the whole thing sounded a bit...odd. If Professor Dumbledore was so worried about Harry, why didn't he just go check on him?

"Bad news princess?"

"Not exactly," the girl said, turning to face her mother. "It's from my headmaster, Professor Dumbledore. He wants to know how I think Harry's doing." She shrugged and bit her lip thoughtfully. Perhaps the headmaster simply didn't have the time to schedule a visit--or Harry's muggle relatives refused to allow it.

She mentally flipped through what she remembered of Harry's recent correspondence, then went on. "He sounds all right in his letters, but that's not always a good indicator."

"What about when he rang you up a couple of days ago?" her father asked. "How did he sound then?"

"A little preoccupied," Hermione admitted. "He wanted to know if I'd ever done any child-minding." Her parents laughed, and she scrunched her face at them before smiling good-naturedly. "Evidently

one of his customers wanted to hire him to watch over her children for the evening," she elaborated, shrugging again. "She wanted to pay him, and he had no idea how much to charge."

"Hmm. Or what to do, I'd wager," her mother added, with a knowing smile.

Giggling, Hermione recalled how Harry had rung her up Thursday evening after supper. He'd made her swear she wouldn't mention a word to Ron, then proceeded to confidently ask her about one of the things she knew absolutely nothing about. When she'd admitted as much to him, he'd been flatteringly amazed.

"What do you mean you have no idea?" he'd demanded in a comically indignant way.

"I never claimed to know everything," she'd responded primly, trying her best to keep from laughing. She could almost hear him raising his eyebrow over the phone.

"Could have fooled me," he'd muttered, sounding ridiculously sulky. He'd paused a minute, then almost whined, "You don't know anything about child-minding, Hermione? Nothing at all?"

That time, Hermione did laugh. Harry had sounded just like Ron did when she wouldn't share her homework answers. "Harry, like you, I spend most of the year at Hogwarts, and I'm an only child," she'd reminded him, logically ticking off points. "I'm home approximately two months in the summer, a lot of that time is spent traveling with my parents, and there are no small children in my neighborhood. Exactly when do you think I've had the time or the opportunity to learn about childcare?"

"I don't know, Muggle studies?" Harry suggested hopefully. There was a pause, during which she imagined he had shrugged, or maybe run his fingers through his hair before he continued. "Sorry, that was stupid. I shouldn't have troubled you."

"No trouble, Harry. You can ring anytime you like. I'm sorry I wasn't able to be of more help..."

They had spoken a bit more before saying goodbye, catching up on each others' news and comparing progress on homework assignments. She'd thanked him for the shirt he'd sent, and told him that she and her parents had opted to stay in England this summer. She didn't feel up to a big adventure, so they were planning to visit some local sights around London that they hadn't been to in years.

Harry had seemed pleased she'd liked her gift, and claimed he was keeping busy and doing fine. He also promised to ask Dumbledore if it might be permissible for him to accompany them on some of their outings. He was supposed to ring again in a few days after contacting the professor, and presumably approaching his employer about some time off.

Hermione considered the letter again. From the sound of it, Harry probably hadn't written to the headmaster yet, or perhaps their owls had crossed. Yes, she thought, feeling a little better now that a reasonable explanation presented itself. Once Professor Dumbledore knew Harry wanted to get out and about, he probably wouldn't be so worried. She thought a bit, composing a rough draft in her head, before something occurred to her, and she turned to face her mother.

"Actually, Mum, you're the only one who's seen Harry recently," Hermione said. "How was he when you went shopping?"

Helen thought a bit, then shrugged. "He seemed fine. A little nervous at first, but he relaxed quickly enough. I think he was afraid we wouldn't get on, or some such nonsense."

"What did you do?" Hermione pressed.

"He met me at the surgery, then we went to the mall. I told you that days ago."

"Yes," her daughter agreed, "but what did you do exactly once you arrived?"

Helen sat at the kitchen table, thinking back. "He made an appointment to get his eyes checked, we had lunch, I did some of my

shopping while he had his examination, I helped him pick out some new glasses frames, then we visited several shops." She paused and shook her head ruefully, before smiling up at her daughter again. "He needed everything, poor lamb. Clothes, shoes, toiletries...I wasn't sure we'd be able to carry it all!"

Hermione nodded, thoughtfully. That wasn't at all surprising. Heaven knew Harry could do with some decent Muggle clothes! She'd been amazed the first time she met him. Anyone who didn't know better would think it was Harry's family who sometimes had trouble making ends meet, not Ron's. The Weasleys might not have an excess of riches, but Mrs. Weasley always made sure everyone had what they needed and that they looked smart when they went out. She was about to let the subject drop when something occurred to her. "Harry bought new glasses?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. His prescription had changed a bit, and frankly his old frames were atrocious. He also purchased some contact lenses," Helen supplied as an afterthought, grinning at her daughter's amazement. "Seemed to think they'd help his Quidditch game."

Hermione blew out a little breath and rolled her eyes. Trust Harry to base a decision like buying contact lenses on something as silly as that! "So was that all, then?"

"I believe so--no, just a moment! We also stopped by the barber shop."

"The barber shop?" Hermione parroted incredulously, regarding her mother with a new respect. Harry seemed to have an aversion to those places.

"Yes," Helen said, smiling at the memory. "It was quite an improvement I must say," she began, then her eyes widened in horror and she covered her mouth with her fingertips.

"What is it dear?" Greg asked frowning a little.

Helen glanced guiltily up at Hermione and sighed. "He asked me not to mention that. I think he wanted to surprise you, dearest. Please, do act surprised the next time you see him."

"Of course, Mum," Hermione assured. She wondered a bit about her mother's comment, then dismissed it. Privately, she allowed that even a small change for the better could be considered "quite an improvement" when applied to Harry's unruly mop.

Hercules seemed to be getting impatient, so Hermione hurried off to fetch some writing supplies, then sat down at the table.

Dear Professor Dumbledore:

I haven't seen Harry since the end of term, but we have been exchanging letters, and he has rung me on the telephone a few times.

So far, he seems all right. I don't know if he's told you, but he has a summer job. The first time he phoned, he was wanting advice on where he should go to purchase some clothes. I was on an outing with my dad, but Mum was here. She needed to do some shopping herself, so she escorted him to the mall.

Hermione blinked at what she'd just written, then frowned up at her mother. "Mum, if Harry needed new clothes for his job down in Surrey, why did he come all the way to London to go shopping?"

"He said he needed to go by Gringott's to exchange some money," Helen shrugged, after thinking a bit. "Since he had to go to Diagon Alley anyway, he decided to take care of his shopping here in the city."

"He went to Gringott's?" Hermione echoed incredulously. When Harry had mentioned getting a job, she'd assumed it had been at the insistence of his aunt and uncle. Further, she had assumed (a bit too optimistically, it seemed) that the Dursleys had purchased, or at least provided the money for Harry to purchase his new clothing.

Knowing what she did of the Dursleys, however, she was fairly certain that they didn't have an account at Gringott's.

That meant... That meant Harry had purchased everything on his own!

"Well...yes," Helen said, slightly taken aback by the fierce indignation creeping into her daughter's eyes. "As far as I'm aware, Gringott's doesn't have branches in the outlying areas, and Harry needed the clothes immediately. He was scheduled to begin working in the next day or so and really couldn't wait."

She stopped and shrugged helplessly. "He said his aunt and uncle weren't available to escort him to the shops, so I just guessed they didn't have time to do the banking either."

Hermione pursed her lips, shuffling this new information into her mental deck then dealing and examining the cards again. Harry had evidently told her mother enough to allay any concerns she might have had about him coming to London unescorted, but she doubted he had told her everything. Harry was funny that way sometimes.

Something was up, but what?

Suspicious, she regarded the letter from Hogwarts. Was this the "real" reason Professor Dumbledore was writing to her?

"Hermione, is something wrong?"

Hermione jumped guiltily, then reluctantly faced her parents. They were watching her seriously, concerned looks on their faces.

"I... I'm not sure," she admitted honestly. "Something just seems...off. With Harry, I mean. It could be nothing but..." she trailed off making a helpless little gesture. On one hand there wasn't enough evidence to justify panicking, and she certainly didn't want to be accused of jumping to conclusions. On the other hand, this was Harry they were discussing, and trouble seemed to follow him where ever he went. She glanced at the letter in her hand again, frowning indecisively.

"Well, it's still early enough, why don't you go ring him up?" her father suggested kindly. "As you say it could be nothing, but unless I miss

my guess, you'll just fret until you know for sure." He peered at her over the top of his newspaper and gave her a knowing smirk. "This will save time."

Hermione blinked, then smiled Of course! she thought happily. Harry had given her the Dursleys' telephone number after their second year at Hogwarts. She had never used it before because Ron had written her after calling himself and warned her that it made Harry's muggle relatives cross. He'd reckoned he'd gotten Harry into trouble. Not wanting to cause any more problems for her dark-haired friend, Hermione had regretfully filed the slip of parchment away.

She'd found out later that Ron hadn't really understood telephones, and thought he needed to shout to be heard...

Hermione rolled her eyes, smiling and shaking her head at the image. Harry's uncle might not be on her list of favorite people, but she supposed she really couldn't blame him for being cross about that.

"I need to check something before I send Professor Dumbledore his reply. Won't be a moment," she told the not-so-patiently waiting owl, before running back to her room.

It took a bit of searching, but she finally found the scrap of parchment Harry had given her between the pages of her Potions text. Hermione giggled as she removed the paper, wondering what Harry would think if he knew. Given his history with Professor Snape, it was probably better not to mention it.

She paused a moment working through what she was going to say, then screwed up her courage and walked to the upstairs line. She was surprised a few seconds later when she found herself listening to a standard "This Number Is Not In Service" recording.

Hermione frowned. Had she misdialed? She tried again with the same result.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, Hermione re-filed Harry's number (in her Charms text this time) and went back downstairs.

Her parents seemed surprised to see her back so soon. She and Harry had chatted a good half hour or more the last time they'd been on the phone.

"No one home, princess?" her mother asked.

"The number isn't in service," Hermione huffed with a little frown. "They must be having trouble with the line. I'll have to try again in the morning."

She regarded Hercules, then decided to just send him on with what she knew. If she thought of something else, she could always go to the Owl Post Office on Diagon Alley.

With that plan in mind, she retrieved her half-finished letter.

To answer your question, sir, Harry seems to be coping fairly well. His letters have been normal, and he sounded all right on the phone. I haven't seen him in person, but as I mentioned previously, my mum has. I asked her opinion, and she said she didn't spot anything unusual.

Your owl seems anxious to be on his way, so I will close here. If anything comes up, or we hear from Harry I will send another owl.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Nodding at the letter, she tied it to Hercules' leg, and sent him on his way. The great owl hooted his thanks, then was gone in a few powerful wing beats.

Hermione was just about to close the kitchen window, when another bird flew through. This time, though, she could identify the sender readily. She and her parents watched in amusement as Ron's little owl, Pigwidgeon, flew over to her, struggling mightily under the weight of the letter he had clamped firmly in his talons.

"Popular tonight, aren't we?" Helen grinned, earning a harassed look from her daughter. She and Greg watched fondly while Hermione caught the little owl and relieved him of his burden before exiting the kitchen and heading for the lounge. Hermione paused long enough to refill the water dish and set out more treats, then tore open Ron's letter.

Hermione!

You'll never guess what that stupid git has done! I can't believe it myself!

Hermione raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes as she read. Someone had managed to get Ron in quite a state! Usually he at least said "Hello, how are you?" before starting with his news.

I just got back from Hogwarts. the letter continued. Professor Dumbledore called a big meeting tonight. You know how Harry's been writing to us, saying he's working, and everything is fine? Well get this! His uncle was transferred with his job! His relatives have moved to Australia!

Hermione blinked in shock. Harry's muggle relatives were in Australia? Horrified, she began to scan the letter more quickly. Ron was understandably agitated and his letter jumped around a bit, but she got his message nonetheless.

Professor Dumbledore sent someone to find them and fetch Harry back, but he wasn't there! The only reason Mum left Harry behind at King's Cross was he thought he'd spotted his uncle! We reckon Harry must have made a mistake--we just can't figure out why he didn't owl someone immediately!

Ron went on, describing the meeting at the castle--at least the portion he'd been present for. From what he said, it had evidently continued after he'd been chivvied back to the Burrow. Then he went into a very creative and detailed rant about the damage he planned to inflict on Harry's tender body the next time he saw him. Hermione skimmed that part. Amusing though it was, it didn't really add anything to her

list of facts. He ended by asking her if she could meet him at the Leaky Cauldron the next day to try and sort things out.

Aghast, Hermione re-folded the letter and slipped it back into its envelope. Feeling a bit sick, she swallowed, and sat down at the table again.

If Harry's Muggle relatives had moved out of the country, and Harry was still in Britain...

...or he talked like he was still in Britain, anyway...

...what did that mean?

Had Harry refused to accompany them?

Had they simply left him behind?

Was that why he was working?

That would explain why Harry's phone number isn't in service, the girl thought, absently tapping the letter on the table. His aunt and uncle would have had it disconnected before they left. So where is he calling from, then? Hotel? Flat? Public phone? She twisted her mouth to one side, considering. A public phone seemed most likely, but she made a mental note to check the number the next time Harry called.

She reached for another sheet of paper, and automatically scribbled a short note of acceptance to Ron, working on the problem all the while.

Slowly, Hermione turned her head and glanced at the letter she had just answered. Professor Dumbledore said he wanted to know how Harry was doing.

According to Ron's letter, Harry had gone missing. He was corresponding like everything was normal, but no one could find him.

Did the headmaster really mean he wanted to know where Harry was?

Blinking again, Hermione stopped writing and massaged her temples. That made no sense! Even if Harry was trying to hide, there were loads of tracking and locator charms available. She and Harry and Ron had found many while trying to help Harry prepare for the Third Task! Wouldn't Professor Dumbledore use one of those instead of fishing around for clues with vague letters?

She wondered if it hadn't occurred to Dumbledore to use such a charm and rejected the notion almost at once. Harry might have been able to fool the headmaster--as he had fooled Ron and herself--into believing that everything was okay, but now that Dumbledore was aware of the situation, she couldn't believe he had overlooked something so obvious.

Eyes narrowing suspiciously, Hermione considered Ron's letter again. He seemed very put out that Harry hadn't contacted them--orders from Professor Dumbledore or no--but there was something else...

Harry had been exempt from finals this last year, so he had done a lot of studying on his own while she and Ron reviewed their class notes and took their exams.

How much does Harry know, anyway? she wondered consideringly. Has he figured out a way to block tracking magic? There must be some defense against it, else Sirius would have been re-captured long ago.

On first glance, the idea seemed quite absurd, but again, this was Harry. When he chose to apply himself, or a subject caught his interest, he could actually be quite brilliant. In fact, the only time she'd ever failed to earn the highest score in class was third year Defense Against the Dark Arts. She'd been nudged out of first place by a certain Mr. Potter.

After making sure her parents didn't mind her making a trip to Diagon Alley, she sent Pig off with her reply to Ron, then she went to her room and re-read all of Harry's letters. She even pulled out some of his old ones, and compared them against his more recent correspondence. By the time she finally joined her parents in the

lounge, she had become convinced of two things: Harry had been left behind by his relatives, and Harry was hiding in Muggle London.

Sunday, July 23, 1995

My arm itches...

Harry Potter twitched reflexively, then lay very still as his awakening brain processed this new information.

Something was moving very slowly and deliberately up his arm.

Spider? he wondered groggily, resisting the urge to twitch again. He'd learned long ago that it was best to stay still when spiders ran across his body. If he jerked suddenly and frightened them, they were far more likely to bite.

As his sleep-fuddled mind became a little more aware, Harry noted that he was stretched out on his side on something very warm and soft. His arm, besides itching, felt slightly cooler than the rest of him.

Hmm. Must be on top of the blanket instead of underneath it, he noted absently.

And whatever was tickling him didn't seem to be a spider after all.

The light touch was about right, but there were no scuttling legs. In fact, it felt more like...hair.

Oh. Right. Must be Patches then, Harry thought with another little flinch as his arm was abandoned, in favor of his ear. That stupid cat just loved to jump onto his bed and tickle him with her whiskers and tail. He made a little sound of protest as the itchy feeling moved very slowly from the top of his ear down to the lobe. It vanished for a second, then it was back, settling lightly on the corner of his jaw, and heading for his chin.

He clumsily waved a hand to shoo her away, and was rewarded with mischievous giggles.

??? thought Harry. When did Patches learn to laugh? While he was working on that, the thing came back, brushing maddeningly across his mouth then attacking his nose.

Making another annoyed noise, Harry swiped at his tormentor again, then raked his teeth across his lips and scrubbed his nose with the back of his hand.

More giggles filled his ears. They sounded awfully familiar.

Finally cottoning on to who it must be, Harry opened one eye, and gave Kitty and Becky a mildly reproving glare. Katrina was bending over him, holding a lock of her long brown hair and grinning impishly. Ah. Mystery solved. Rebecca was watching her sister's antics and smiling brightly. Every now and then she would laugh delightedly into her hands.

Harry rubbed a hand over his face, then sat up and scratched his arm. "You could've just given me a shake, you know," he reproved, frowning a bit and blinking a few times.

Kitty shrugged, smiling unrepentantly. "This was more fun."

"Oh, really." Harry arched an eyebrow, devilment creeping into his own expression. "What if I'd have sneezed?" he asked, his tone strongly implying "snot" or "cooties."

He got just the reaction he was looking for. Kitty, who had been threatening to tickle him again, snatched her hair back with a horrified squeak.

Harry grinned then blinked, trying to determine why his eyes felt so horrible. Bleagh! He blinked again, then realized he could see. Ah. He must have fallen asleep in his contacts. Harry winced a little, making a mental note not to do that again. They felt uncomfortably dry, and practically welded to his eyeballs. He blinked again and rubbed his eyes gingerly. Why hadn't he removed them, for Heaven's sake?

Oh, right. He hadn't meant to fall asleep. He'd been planning to wait up for Janet, then make his way back to the Leaky Cauldron when she returned.

So much for that idea.

Before he'd started entertaining the notion of leaving when the Wrights returned, he'd planned on being up and dressed the next morning before the family rose.

Since the girls had obviously awakened first, falling asleep with his contacts in might have been for the best, even if it was a little uncomfortable at the moment. He wasn't sure how he would have explained suddenly having green eyes. More "magic," he supposed.

Stretching, he regarded the two girls in front of him. They were both looking entirely too pleased with themselves, secrets sparkling in their eyes, and conspiratorial smiles on their faces.

Hmm. This must be that "Up To Something" expression Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia always claimed he had.

Funny, he didn't seem to recall ever smiling like that in their presence. In fact, he couldn't remember smiling much at all.

"All right," he finally said, crossing his arms on his chest. "What are you two on about?"

Arthur Weasley chuckled to himself as he walked through the mostly-deserted halls of the Ministry of Magic. It had been a busy morning.

He'd been sent over to the Grangers' residence to follow up on the owl Professor Dumbledore received late last night from Hermione.

Arthur smiled, recalling the visit. Greg Granger had been very generous with his knowledge of Muggle appliances, and Helen and Hermione had been a veritable gold mine of information. They could now say with some certainty that Harry was still in Britain. London, in fact, if Hermione's suspicions were correct.

Eager to share the good news, he'd apparated to Arabella's house, as much to lay some of Sirius' fears to rest as to write Albus a note on the charmed parchment. Remus had broken into helpless laughter when Arthur revealed that the "service" Harry had been providing was, in fact, child-minding.

Sirius had looked comically amazed for a couple of seconds before adopting an "I-Knew-It-All-Along" attitude. "I can't believe you were so worried, Moony," he'd teased, eyes alight. "No faith. No faith at all."

"That doesn't even deserve the dignity of a response, Paddy," Remus chided, but he was smiling while he said it. "Now all you have to do is apologize to Harry."

"Aw, come on, Moony. Harry doesn't really have to know, does he?"

"Oh, I suppose not. Besides, think of all the wasted blackmail opportunities..."

Arthur smiled again, gratified that Lupin and Black had been able to get their friendship back on track after the Potter's Secret-Keeper fiasco and all the unpleasantness that ensued. As it turned out, neither man had really wanted to believe ill of the other. Their mutual mistake had been seriously underestimating Peter Pettigrew.

Weasley frowned slightly, remembering the late seventies/early eighties as he continued on his way. Several people, both in and out of the Order had known that Voldemort was targeting the Potters, although only a few knew exactly why.

Unfortunately, as James and Lily were forced to sever more and more ties before eventually going under the Fidelius Charm, the list of likely suspects grew shorter and shorter until only the Marauders were left. Since James Potter was the target, and neither Sirius nor Remus considered Peter Pettigrew to be a threat, they had been forced to consider each other.

Arthur sighed as he entered the lift, and pressed the button for Percy's floor. It had been a mistake. A stupid tragic mistake that'd had

horrible repercussions for all involved. Fortunately, things seemed to be sorting themselves out, now. After all Sirius and Remus had gone through, it was nice to see them putting the past behind them and renewing the bonds they'd forged as children and young adults.

Feeling slightly better when he reached his floor, Arthur set out in Percy's general direction, only to be distracted by a light in Amos Diggory's office. Frowning, he ventured closer and peeked in. Sure enough, there was Amos, sitting at his desk, shuffling through some mundane-looking pieces of parchment.

Stifling another sigh, Arthur watched the other wizard, noting the change in him and shaking his head sadly. Amos had always been rather enthusiastic in everything he did. Loud and friendly, he was especially known for his devotion to his only son. He could be a right bore about it, really. As far as Amos Diggory was concerned, the Boy Who Lived himself didn't shine as brightly as his Cedric.

As he discretely regarded the grieving wizard, Arthur found himself wishing he'd been a little more patient in the past. He couldn't bear the thought of losing any of his children. Losing your only one like the Diggorys did must be agony.

Reaching out, he knocked gently on the doorframe. Diggory started a bit at the interruption. "Arthur! What on earth are you doing here?"

"I need to have a quick word with Percy. If he spends any more time here, I think we'll have to move his belongings," Weasley replied, then cringed reflexively when Amos' eyes grew distant for a moment before looking at him again.

"Ah yes, I saw him earlier," Amos said after a few seconds' pause. "Junior Assistant to the Minister...you must be proud."

"I am, thank you," Arthur replied politely. Percy's promotion had actually come as something of a surprise after the Crouch affair. Privately, he suspected Fudge had ulterior motives, and had hired Percy hoping to get insights on Dumbledore's plans. It was a well-established fact that Arthur was close to the Headmaster, after all. He'd never breathed a word to Percy of course, because it was

possible he was being paranoid, but the doubt was still there all the same. Fortunately, the Minister's oh-so-transparent motives had been easily thwarted by not discussing Order business at the Burrow--something Arthur did anyway.

Amos nodded noncommittally, continuing to regard Arthur very seriously. The red-haired wizard was beginning to get nervous under his companion's intense scrutiny, when Diggory finally looked away and sighed. "I don't mean to tell you your business, Arthur, but surely you of all people know that the Potter boy is not the way the papers make him out to be."

That was probably the last thing Arthur was expecting Amos to say. He blinked in surprise, then croaked, "What?!"

"Madam Pomphrey and Professor Dumbledore allowed my wife and I to see him the morning after the Third Task," Diggory said, evidently misinterpreting the root of Arthur's dismay. "We were a sight, the lot of us. All three of us grieving and in shock. I couldn't even talk to him properly. He told us what happened, how he and Cedric had agreed to tie. Ced would have let him have it, you know. That was the kind of person he was."

Arthur mentally settled in, content to let Amos speak about his beloved son if he wanted to, but Diggory surprised him by returning to the topic at hand almost immediately. "I could tell when he spoke of it that he regretted his decision, but I can't fault him for wanting to share with my boy," Diggory said softly, speaking again of Harry. "He even tried to give us his winnings."

Amos closed his eyes for a moment, gathering himself, then went on. "He didn't speak a lot about how he managed to get back, although from the looks of him he went through something terrible. He just told us how Cedric...how Cedric had been hit with the Killing Curse..."

"Amos, please, don't do this to yourself," Arthur pleaded when Diggory stuttered to a stop and swallowed with some difficulty. "Harry's my youngest son's best friend. I know he's nothing like the papers say. Truthfully, he doesn't like being the center of attention. I

think he finds his fame quite bewildering at times, especially since he grew up in the Muggle world."

"Yes, the more I think on it, the more I'm inclined to agree with you. I let the entire matter go to my head. Expected a fourteen-year-old boy to be adept at handling the press," Diggory admitted, shaking his head ruefully. "I was just trying to look out for my boy's interests. Ced tried to tell me that Harry didn't sign up on his own, and he didn't like all the attention, but I thought he was just being Ced. He almost never spoke ill of anyone. No, all I could see was how the paper praised Harry Potter for being the Hogwarts champion, while Ced was overlooked or thrust into the background." Amos shrugged sadly and was silent for a moment, then he brightened abruptly. "Speaking of Ced, my petition to the Minister to have a memorial service has been approved. We're going to schedule it near the end of summer. Most everyone should be back from holiday, and getting ready to return to school."

Arthur returned his smile. "That's good to hear, Amos," he enthused, privately fuming that it had been necessary at all. In the mad scramble to keep the events of the Tri-Wizard Tournament as quiet as possible, Cedric's funeral had been neatly swept under the carpet with the rest of the more "disturbing" details by the Ministry political machine. Cedric had been laid to rest with only a few close family members in attendance, like he was a traitor or criminal, or else had no one to mourn him. That had gone down hard for everyone who knew him well, especially his father. He blinked and turned his attention back to Amos when he realized he was speaking again.

"...think he'd like to attend? Harry, I mean."

"I think he'd like to, but I'm not sure if he'll be able to, circumstances being what they are," Arthur replied, neatly skirting the Boy Who Lived's current "gone missing" and "uncontactable" status.

"I'll forward the request to Professor Dumbledore, then. I'd like to speak to him again, I think, now that a little time has passed. Perhaps I can say more than 'hello' without dissolving into mush." Amos paused, then met Arthur's gaze as something occurred to him. "Funny thing was, I thought I was going to get an opportunity when I

ran an errand the other day. There's a boy working in Flourish & Blotts who bears a striking resemblance to him. Black hair, slim build..."

Arthur's interest was piqued at once, but he tried to keep undue eagerness out of his voice. "Really?" he inquired, as one might when keeping up their end of a polite conversation.

Diggory nodded. "It wasn't him, though," he said much to Weasley's disappointment. "The dark eyes were my first hint. He was also taller, and a bit more filled out. His voice was a little deeper too, and he doesn't wear glasses."

Amos paused again with a chuckle. "One of the other clerks noticed me looking at him, and stopped me before I could approach him. Evidently they get that a lot from people who haven't been on the Alley in a while. From what I could tell, it's become something of an inside joke among the staff."

Arthur nodded, filing this information away. They spoke a little more about office matters, and the successful warding of the Diggorys' home, before Arthur turned to leave. "I'll be off then," he said, then paused in the doorway. "I'm supposed to escort my son, Ron, to the Leaky Cauldron a little later. We were thinking of getting a bite. Would you and the Mrs. care to join us?" he asked. The Diggorys hadn't been out much since Cedric's funeral. Obviously he wasn't the only one who noticed.

"Not today, I'm afraid. We're heading over to my parents' for Sunday lunch, and I promised I wouldn't be long," Diggory said, tapping the parchment he was holding into a neat stack. "Another time?"

"At your convenience. Give everyone my best," Arthur said cheerily, waving as he exited Diggory's office and continued down the hall.

As he walked, Arthur wondered a bit about Amos' concern regarding his perception of Harry. Perhaps Percy had said something without thinking. A pro-Potter stance would certainly be unpopular in his current office, and his middle son was pleased with his new position. He had always been extremely conscious of what was and wasn't

"proper" as well. Much more so than any of the other children. It was possible he was unwilling to rock the boat or fight office politics--Heaven knew those courses of action had cost Arthur over the years. Sympathy towards Muggles was the equivalent of career suicide in some offices. Still, he had managed and he liked to think he'd made some small difference along the way.

Finally reaching his son's office, Arthur knocked, then opened the door and poked his head in. "Perce?"

"Dad!" Percy said, looking up in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Two things," Arthur responded. "I'd like to know if you'd like to join Ron and me at the Leaky Cauldron for lunch, and I have a question from Professor Dumbledore."

"Lunch sounds nice, but I can't today. Loads to do," Percy said, indicating his littered desk with one hand while continuing to write with the other. "About the other," he said, pausing uncomfortably, "you probably should make an appointment to see the Minister."

"I was hoping you might be able to help me out, Percy," Arthur pressed.

Sighing a little irritably, his son put down his quill and laced his fingers. "All right, Dad. What do you need?" he asked, finally meeting his father's gaze.

Arthur cast around a second trying to decide where to begin. "There's been some trouble regarding Harry," he finally stated, but before he could elaborate, Percy spoke again.

"There's always trouble regarding Harry," Percy sighed in a rather put-upon way. "What's he done this time?"

Arthur frowned slightly, not liking Percy's tone. With any of his other boys, the statement would have obviously been made in a joking manner. Percy, on the other hand, sounded dead serious.

"He hasn't done anything," Arthur said a little defensively. He wondered for the first time if seeking Percy's assistance had been such a bright idea, then dismissed the thought. Percy had always been more formal and serious than his siblings.

"Based on some information that has come to his attention, Professor Dumbledore has reason to believe Harry's Archive folder is malfunctioning," he explained.

Percy obviously hadn't been expecting that. "Why does Dumbledore think that?" he asked blankly.

"The evidence suggests his guardians have been negligent," Arthur continued cautiously. "His folder was supposed to alarm if anything unusual happened, and it hasn't," he said, after briefly explaining how the thing had been charmed.

"Maybe his folder hasn't alerted because nothing's wrong," Percy suggested, shrugging unconcernedly.

"That's the assumption people have been working under for the past several years. Actually I think the folder has been silent so long everyone had practically forgotten it. Unfortunately, Harry has been in very real danger during his time at Hogwarts if nothing else, and the thing has never made a sound."

"So what does this have to do with me?" Percy wanted to know. "If you're so worried, just go to the Census Library and Archive on Monday and have someone pull it for you."

"Harry's folder is sealed. We need approval from the Wizengamot and the Minister's Office to access it."

Percy looked scandalized. "Are you suggesting I go behind my superior's back to allow Dumbledore access to a restricted folder? No! Absolutely not! The headmaster can make an appointment and go through proper channels just like everyone else!"

"Well, normally he would, Perce, but this is a bit of an emergency."

"No, Dad. An emergency would be you and I both getting sacked for doing something so stupidly irresponsible!" Percy said, his voice rising angrily. "I'm not risking my position because Dumbledore plays favorites with Harry Potter!"

"What?" Arthur said weakly, unable to believe his ears. "Percy," he started to protest, but his son cut him off.

"Oh, come on, Dad! When I was Prefect, and then Head Boy he got away with murder!" Percy paused a second, then said a little snidely, "Maybe the charms on his folder are intelligent enough to differentiate between 'legitimately threatened' and 'in danger because of lack of judgment'."

"Percy! I know for a fact Harry's uncle barricaded him in his room summer before second year!"

"Oh, don't tell me you've suddenly decided to believe Fred and George's rubbish. Harry illegally levitated a pudding and dumped it on the head of his uncle's dinner guest!" Percy snapped. "He was probably sent to his room and had to go to bed without supper or something. You and Mum would have done the same or worse to any of us!"

"And how do you know that?" Arthur blurted in dismay.

"I've had lunch with Minister Fudge a few times," his son responded, unconsciously sitting a little straighter in his seat. "He's told me a few things, and explained what's really been going on since the Third Task."

Oh, I can't wait for this, Arthur thought dully, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on.

Percy didn't seem to notice his father's discomfort. He puffed himself up importantly, and plunged in, declaring that Harry had been something of a loose cannon since he was re-introduced to the wizarding world, and it was time someone put a stop to it.

"He got by with a warning over the pudding incident, and he wasn't disciplined at all when he inflated his aunt the following summer. Of course everyone was preoccupied with Sirius Black, so it was an understandable oversight, but now the Minister feels he may have made an error in judgment and unintentionally encouraged Harry's rash behavior by not pressing charges."

What??! Arthur thought again, feeling like the world was unraveling in his hands while his son prattled on about how Harry told tall tales, and Harry loved to be the center of attention, and how the Ministry had been forced to step in after the Third Task to avert a nationwide panic.

"Percy! Harry saw You-Know-Who resurrected, and Cedric Diggory was murdered in cold blood by one of his Death Eaters!" he finally interrupted.

"Yes, well, Minister Fudge took statements from some the 'Death Eaters' Harry supposedly identified," Percy said, holding up both hands and making "quotes" signals with his index and middle fingers when he said 'Death Eaters.' "All of them had perfectly viable alibis. In fact, at least three of them were parents of Slytherin students that Harry is known to feud with."

"You believe Malfoy over Dumbledore?" Arthur nearly shouted, knowing immediately who at least one of these "impeccable" sources had to be.

"Dad, Dad, Dad," Percy sighed pityingly. "I don't know if Dumbledore truly believes Harry, or he thinks stirring up a panic would be a good distraction to cover some botched spell, but there's no doubt the man is finally slipping. Cedric Diggory's death was a tragic accident and nothing more. Besides, if You Know Who had returned, don't you think someone would have noticed by now?"

Arthur ground his teeth in frustration as any hopes he might have had for sharing the whole truth with his son dissipated like wisps of smoke. Still, he had to get his hands on that folder. "What if Dumbledore's right, Perce? What if the folder is malfunctioning and Harry's relatives are not taking proper care of him?" he asked, trying another route.

"Harry always seems to have everything he needs," Percy retorted, reddening slightly. "Look, I don't blame you for falling for the act," he admitted when his father's mouth fell open in shock. "He's very sincere, very convincing, but the sad fact is, he's been playing all of us for fools! He resents his Muggle relatives, probably because they keep him in line, and he takes advantage of your kindness! Personally, I don't see how can you stand there in good conscience and let Ron continue to associate with him! Ron has been injured and in danger of expulsion more than once because of his friendship with Harry!"

"Your sister is also alive today because of him!" Arthur snapped, then immediately regretted it when hurt flashed across his son's face.

"Oh, so Fred and George and I were wrong for following instructions and going back to the Common Room?" he asked tightly.

Arthur winced. That hadn't come out exactly right. "No, Percy. You couldn't have accessed the Chamber of Secrets even if you'd attempted it. None of us could. The password had to be spoken in Parseltongue! I'm merely grateful that someone was able to help her! When Professor McGonagall contacted us, she was already presumed dead!"

Percy subsided a bit at this. Looking up at his father again, he sighed grudgingly. "All right, Dad. It's been ages since anyone's checked on Harry in person, so I'll put a request in for someone to pay his relatives a visit. If they find signs of neglect, I suppose he'll become a ward of the Ministry until he can be placed with another family or he turns seventeen."

"Don't be ridiculous, Percy! Your mother and I will take him in. The warding on the house is done!" Arthur backpedaled. He wanted the folder, not an inquiry. Fudge was the last person he'd trust with Harry's guardianship. He was already tight with Malfoy. If word got back to You Know Who that Harry was no longer safely behind the blood protection of his relatives, young Potter would be in an obscene amount of danger. Besides which, their carefully orchestrated plan of

capturing the dark wizards when they attacked Privet Drive would be completely blown.

"Dad, what's going on?" Percy asked, annoyance glittering in his eyes.

"I..." Arthur faltered. "I'm really not at liberty to say," he finished lamely.

"Look, Dad, no offense, but Dumbledore is skating on very thin ice right now, and if you're not careful he'll pull you in with him. He makes vague accusations without a shred of proof and expects everyone to snap to attention! And if that wasn't bad enough, he's teaching Harry to do the same! I need some evidence. 'Because Dumbledore said so' just isn't good enough!"

"Why on Earth do you think You Know Who would reveal himself?" Arthur hissed, his temper finally beginning to fray. "He isn't having to work at all! Fudge is doing everything for him! The Ministry is generously giving him time to regroup, plan and prepare, AND slandering the two wizards he considers his greatest threats."

Percy was momentarily taken aback by his normally mild-mannered father's vehemence, then his face reddened, and his own "Weasley" temper came to the fore. "You Know Who is dead, Dad! I can't believe you're expending all this energy chasing around after a fairy tale!" He paused and narrowed his eyes resentfully. "This sort of thing was why you've never been able to get ahead!"

"You Know Who was never dead, just banished--and what the bloody hell are you on about?"

"You've allowed things to drag down your career. You've always said what you thought, and done as you wished instead of trying to advance and better yourself. You've concerned yourself with Dumbledore and Muggles, and Harry bloody Potter instead of your own family!" Percy shouted, rising from his chair and slamming his fist down on his desk.

Arthur gaped, dumbfounded as his son's annoyance quickly became a towering fury. It was as if a dam had burst inside Percy, for once he got started he couldn't seem to stop. He raged at how hard he'd had to work to overcome Arthur's "eccentricities" since joining the Ministry, and how he was never the favored child no matter how hard he tried, and how his parents and the rest of the whole bloody family bent over backwards for the Boy Who Lived. He railed at always having to make do with shoddy second-hand school materials and accused Arthur and Molly of gross irresponsibility for having such a large family. When he finally vowed that he would play the game and attend required dinner parties, and do what he had to do to succeed so that any children he might have would always be well provided for, and have the best materials available, the long fuse of Arthur's temper finally burned to the end.

Beyond furious, Arthur eyed his son coldly, and before he could stop himself, he spoke the words he'd kept to himself until now, to wit: "You got this cushy job because Fudge wanted a connection to Dumbledore."

Percy stilled, anger and hurt and utter betrayal written all over his face. "No," he finally denied. "No! I've worked hard! I've done a good job! The minister picked me specifically! He said he thought I had potential!"

"No one goes directly from an entry-level job to the Minister's office--especially on the heels of a fiasco like the Crouch affair!" Arthur retorted. "But since I'm obviously wasting my breath and your precious time, I'll state my business and go." Arthur paused for a moment, gathering himself, then continued in a clipped tone, counting points off on his fingers. "First, there's no need to send a representative to the Dursleys. We know they have been mistreating Harry and evidence is being gathered as we speak. Second, Harry's folder needs to be looked after, so would you be good enough to schedule an appointment with the Minister for me or Professor Dumbledore? You may not care, but I will not tolerate Harry or any child being mistreated."

"Oh, so that's why you always let my brothers call me 'pompous' and 'arrogant' and 'conceited'?" Percy said resentfully, leafing through an

appointment book. Finding an empty slot, he scribbled Dumbledore's name in, then filled out an appointment card and slid it across the desk to his father. "Now if there's nothing further..."

"No, Percy. Nothing at all," Arthur replied, quietly turning to leave.

Chapter 25 - Did I Just See What I Thought I Saw?

Sunday, July 23, 1995

Stephen Wright startled awake and lay still for a second, unable to immediately identify where he was or what had awakened him.

Frowning, he propped himself up on one elbow, glancing around the unfamiliar room, and relaxing almost immediately when he recognized his bedroom furniture and spotted his sleeping wife. That's right. I'm in London, he thought, as events caught up with him. Hmm. Definitely not in Kansas anymore, Toto...

Chuckling softly, he shook his head. It was always the same after a move. He was more accustomed to it than most because to his years in the military, but relocation was jarring and disorienting at best. It always took a while to meet people, learn the area and establish new routines. Depending on how things went it could take days, weeks, or even months before the initial strangeness subsided and a new house felt like home.

Although, Steve thought, laying back again and admiring the bedroom, it shouldn't take long this time. Janet had been too tired to give him the nickel tour last night, but from what he had seen, the place could almost be declared "done." Glancing at his wife he shook his head again, this time in wonder. They'd pared down their belongings dramatically in preparation for the move, but even so he'd never dreamed his little Jannie would be able to get so much done before he arrived.

Carefully, to avoid waking her, Steve slid an arm under his wife and pulled her close. They'd had their ups and downs over the years, of course, but he couldn't think of anyone he'd rather have on his team. Pressing a soft kiss into her hair, he recalled how she'd gotten all teary-eyed last night, telling him about the day she met Sparky.

It was awful, Steve, I took my eyes off of them for just a second, and when I looked up again they were gone! Luckily they wandered into Tom's place. He kept them safe inside and sent Sparky out to look for

me. I kept it together until he took me inside, and then I bawled all over myself...

The thing was, he could almost picture it. That was classic Janet. Standard Operating Procedure. She could cope remarkably well with almost any situation, but as soon as it was over she'd dissolve into tears--almost guaranteed.

It was a reaction he'd always found baffling. Why fall to pieces after the fact? The crisis was over. Problem solved. Smiling a little ruefully now, Steve recalled one occasion when he'd pulled her to the side, and asked just that. He'd thought it was a reasonable question, and had actually been trying to cheer her up, but instead of looking up at him and saying "Why you're right dear, how could I have been so silly?" Janet had only cried harder, and taken twice as long to calm down. Since then, he'd learned to simply accept it. His job was to offer support and comfort and wait for the storm to pass.

Still unsure what had awakened him, he listened hard for a few seconds, hoping whatever it was would repeat itself. The house stayed quiet, though, so he shrugged and closed his eyes again, enjoying the peace and closeness while he could before the Wright Family Circus opened for business. He almost never woke before Jannie did, so this was a rare treat. She and Becky were the morning people. Kitty, bless her, was more of a night owl like himself. Curious, he spared a glance at his watch, and raised his eyebrows in surprise. It was almost ten! Jan and the girls must have really exhausted themselves yesterday, especially if Becky was still sleeping.

Ah, well, it won't last, Steve mused, deciding he must have been awakened by some unfamiliar noise. If they aren't up by ten I'll get them up. Probably won't be necessary, though, he thought sleepily. Unless he was sadly mistaken, it wouldn't be long before Kitty and Becky came barging in. He grinned again, deciding that the intrusion might be okay...just this once.

Actually, it was hard to believe they were actually in England--or anywhere besides the States. He'd never been given an overseas rotation as a soldier, and had thought he wouldn't get a chance once they re-entered civilian life. Fortunately, he'd been wrong.

He'd earned his Bachelor's Degree in History before enlisting, but Janet had still been in college when they'd married. It had taken a while, with the frequent moving and Kitty coming along, but she'd finally managed to earn her degree in Computer Science. When she graduated and entered the workforce, she soon discovered that overseas opportunities were available there as well. They'd discussed it as a future possibility, but it had been a moot point while he was still in the service.

Once he'd gotten out they'd taken it a bit more seriously. Janet began keeping a close eye on the jobs coming open, and they began saving both money and vacation time, but somehow it never worked out. Sometimes the jobs available weren't in her skill set. On other occasions the timing stunk. Becky was the most recent monkey-wrench that had been thrown into the works. Janet had actually been considering a couple of openings about the time she discovered she was pregnant. Not surprisingly, that little detail effectively squashed her enthusiasm for packing up and journeying to parts unknown.

The delays had been frustrating at the time, but in the end Steve found he hadn't minded much. It had actually worked in their favor. They'd had a little more time to save, and in the meantime he'd finished his Master's Degree and been hired by one of the local universities as a professor of History.

This time, when an overseas position had presented itself, the timing and location couldn't have been better. He had some teaching time under his belt, and was getting to the point where he really needed to research and publish a paper. England was the perfect place to do just that.

He'd submitted his paperwork announcing his sabbatical when they found out they'd be moving, and everything seemed to be going well. All he had to do was teach a couple of classes during the first summer session. They'd planned to make the trip together when he finished grading exams and clearing the department.

That was about the time events had gotten away from them. Janet's report date had been unexpectedly moved up, and it had been too

late for him to back out of the classes. His wife hadn't been thrilled about going ahead without him, but she'd coped before. She'd also been determined to allow plenty of time to unpack and settle in before starting her new job. A couple of moves ago she'd begun working immediately upon arriving, and it had taken forever to get the house in order. Janet, especially, had been traumatized by that ordeal, hence her insistence on getting things squared away immediately.

Chuckling again, he gave Janet another kiss, settled more comfortably on his pillows, waiting for his family to wake. He must have drifted off at one point, because he soon found himself surfacing from a light doze. This time there was no question as to what had awakened him, however. It was faint, but he was definitely hearing the murmur of voices downstairs. There were little clinks and rattles, too, and a pleasant aroma of cinnamon in the air.

Damn! he thought irritably. Jannie must have gotten up and gone downstairs-- He broke off abruptly when he realized that Janet was, in fact, still sleeping contentedly in his arms. That meant...

The kids!

Wanting to avert a disaster, he carefully tried to ease Janet's head off his chest without disturbing her, but she stirred at the shift, and began to show signs of waking.

"Hey, you," he said, with a teasing smile as she opened her eyes. "I thought you might be planning to sleep all day."

"Hmm. Not much chance of that with Becky around," Janet yawned, stretching. She sniffed the air curiously and asked, "What's that?"

"I'm not sure, but I think Kitty and Becky might be trying to make us breakfast in bed again," he replied.

Janet's eyes widened in horror, imagining evil things being done to her kitchen. In a remarkably smooth motion for someone who had just awakened, she threw back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Come on!" she urged, hurrying out the door and

padding barefoot down the stairs, giving her husband little choice but to follow.

As they rushed downstairs, Steve noted that his earlier conclusion about the house had been correct. It was more obvious now that the sun was up, but he had little time to admire it as he hurried along. Catching up with Janet, he was surprised to find her standing to the side of a doorway that he presumed led into the kitchen.

Confused by her behavior, he walked over and stood behind her. "Aren't we going in?" he asked.

"Yes, in just a second," she whispered in response, nodding toward the activity in the kitchen.

Steve looked in the direction she indicated, and saw the boy from last night standing in front of the stove. Becky was tugging on the leg of his sweatpants, and Kitty was setting the table looking disappointed.

"I still think we should have brought them breakfast in bed," Katrina was saying while Rebecca looked beseechingly up at--John...no Jim--and said "Becky wanna help too, 'Parky!'"

"I think they'll be more comfortable at the table," the boy responded, tossing a grin over his shoulder. When she continued to sulk, he said, "Look, you ask when they come downstairs. If they say okay, we'll serve them breakfast in bed another day. Fair?" He waited for her less-than-gracious nod then turned his attention to the dark-haired toddler beside him.

After checking whatever it was he was frying--bacon by the smell of it--and taking it off the heat, Jim leaned down and picked up Becky. "Poor thing," he commiserated. "Everything in the world is sharp or hot or breakable, isn't it?" He paused a moment, regarding her seriously, then snapped his fingers. "I know what you can do. Come on. Let's wash your hands."

Steve and Janet exchanged a curious glance as Sparky carried Becky to the sink. "Those two are buds from way back," Janet

explained softly, while he pulled a chair over so the baby could reach the tap. "We all like Sparky, but Becky's claimed him for her own."

"So I see," Steve responded, watching as Sparky carefully washed and dried Becky's hands then fetched four plastic cups from the cupboard, and the container of ice from the freezer. He placed these items on the counter, then shoved Becky's chair over so she was positioned in front of them.

"There now," he said when he finished. "Do you know how many three is?"

Becky nodded enthusiastically and held up three fingers, making the boy chuckle softly.

"Well done," he said, smiling. "Now, if you'll put three pieces of ice in each cup, that would really help a lot."

Kitty, who had finished setting the table, wandered over to observe, and frowned a little when she saw the cups. "We need another one, Sparky," she said, taking another out of the cupboard. "Me and Becky and Mom and Dad and you makes five," she said, indicating the table where she had set five places.

Sparky, Steve noted, looked surprised at her announcement, but recovered quickly. Taking the proffered cup, with a quiet 'thanks', he set it with the others without further comment. Odd, he thought with a slight frown. Did he forget about me, or was he not expecting to stay?

"What else can I do?" Kitty asked, bouncing eagerly while her sister carefully counted out ice cubes.

Jim looked around for a second then shrugged. "Nothing really--oh, wait! You can put this on the table if you'd like," he said, holding out the sugar bowl. "Otherwise I believe we're all set. We just have to put the kettle on, let the buns finish baking, and wait for your Mum and Dad to wake up."

"If they're not up soon, I'll wake them up," Kitty stated confidently, holding one hand in a "thumbs up" position and jabbing herself in the chest, while reaching out with the other.

Two hands! Steve almost shouted, but it was too late. Kitty hadn't been paying attention, and fumbled with the sugar bowl when Sparky set it in her hand. Beside him, Janet made a little sound of distress, clearly expecting the china container to shatter on the kitchen floor as it slipped from her daughter's fingers...

CLACK!

Wow. Good hands! Stephen thought admiringly. Almost faster than he could follow, the boy had reached out and snatched the bowl and its lid out of mid-air. Janet opened her eyes after involuntarily wincing, and grinned happily when she realized the china on china sound she heard was not breakage. "Maybe both hands would be better," the boy suggested simply, further impressing the elder Wrights as he replaced the lid on the sugar bowl and offered it to Kitty again.

The girl bit her lip and nodded glumly. "Sorry," she said, looking apologetically at the sugar that had spilled.

Jim waved it off. "Don't fret. We'll have this sorted out in no time. You put some more sugar in the bowl, and I'll sweep the floor. Where does Janet keep the broom again?"

"I know!" Rebecca exclaimed before her sister could answer. She had finished her task and was eager to help some more. "Becky get!" she said, climbing off the chair, running over to the basement door, and plucking the broom from its hook on the wall. Unfortunately, when she came running back, she severely misjudged where the end of the long wooden handle was. She scurried up to Sparky intending to hand him the broom, but somehow wound up rapping him rather solidly on the nose instead.

Jim's exclamation of surprise and pain covered Janet's soft gasp. She immediately started to hurry into the kitchen, but Steve put a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "Wait," he requested, when she turned and looked questioningly at him. "I want to see how he handles this."

Janet's eyes narrowed, and she speared him with her best I-Can't-Believe-You're-Being-So-Mean glare. "Let go, Steve! He's hurt!" she hissed, but he stood by his decision. They were right there, and could step in instantly if needed. Besides, Jannie had been bragging about this kid almost nonstop since she met him, and Steve was curious to know what he was made of.

"Just another couple of minutes, Jannie. Please." Actually, given what he'd just seen of the boy's reflexes, Stephen was impressed as hell that Jim hadn't instinctively taken a swing at Becky. He knew from painful personal experience that getting hit in the nose, even just a little bit, hurt like it was nobody's business. Lashing out was a fairly common reaction, as was hollering, jumping around and turning the air blue with a few well chosen curse words.

So far Jim hadn't done any of that. He'd actually controlled himself remarkably well. The real test would come when he got his breath back enough to speak, however.

Turning his attention back to the kitchen, Steve winced in sympathy. Jim was covering the lower half of his face with one hand and gripping the counter with the other. His eyes were screwed tightly shut, and he was breathing rather heavily through the mouth.

Kitty recovered first and tentatively approached. "Sparky? Are you okay?" she asked gingerly, receiving a nod in reply. Reassured, she smiled a little, then pushed the chair Becky had been standing on over to him. "Here, sit down a minute," she suggested, remembering how her mom had told her dad to sit once when he'd smashed his thumb with the hammer. "Do you want some ice?"

"M'fine, just give me a second," Jim mumbled, his voice slightly muffled by his hand. He did take advantage of the offered chair, though, dropping down on it without preamble and propping his elbows on his knees.

When he looked up and removed his hand a few seconds later, Steve wasn't surprised to see that the boy's eyes were watering. Ouch, Becky really nailed him, he grimaced, noting the red mark that looked

like it might discolor. "We'll have to give him a little extra for hazardous working conditions," he murmured to his wife.

Calmer now, Janet gave him a mildly reproving look. "And breakfast," she added, starting to smile.

Steve nodded. "And talking Kitty out of serving it to us in bed..." he grinned, rolling his eyes and making his wife choke on suppressed laughter.

They were just about to announce their presence, when a horrified shriek made them both jump. Unnerved by Sparky's tears, Becky had broken out of her shocked stupor at last. When he reached up and wiped his face with both hands, she dropped the broom with a loud clatter and began crying inconsolably.

Jim looked a little stunned at first, then began to shake his head as though denying a statement. Reaching out, he set her in his lap, gathered her into a loose hug and began speaking quiet reassurances into her hair. "Shush, love, that's not true," he soothed, closing his eyes as if remembering something unpleasant. "I'm not angry and I still like you. I know it was an accident, and I don't believe you hit me just to be mean."

Becky's cries soon lost their hysterical edge and tapered off into sniffles and hitches, but Steve found himself frowning in confusion. How had Sparky zeroed in on the root of her distress so quickly and accurately? He sounded like he was addressing specific worries, but as far as Steve could tell, Becky had just been crying. She hadn't said anything. Was it instinct? Lucky guess? Telepathic powers? He rolled his eyes as the last possibility drifted through his head. Jeez, Wright, you obviously need to lay off the science fiction novels...

It took a few more minutes of Sparky's and Kitty's combined efforts, before Becky was mollified. As he observed, Steve glanced at the boy's wound again, and was gratified to see that the redness was already beginning to fade. Good. Maybe it won't bruise after all, he thought, smiling a bit as Kitty fetched a tissue and wiped her sister's face.

Calmer now, but still worried, Rebecca sat up and ran questioning fingers over the mark on Sparky's face. "Hurts?" she asked, a very serious look on her baby face.

"Nah," he assured with a shrug and a smile. "It'll be fine, you'll see, but this is why your mum always tells you not to run in the house."

It was a good point, but probably not the best thing to say under the circumstances, Steve decided candidly. Jim winced at his blunder, and glanced helplessly at Katrina when Becky nodded miserably, looking like she might just cry all over again. Hmm. It was probably time to stop lurking and lend a hand. He'd seen enough.

"Let's back up and give them a little warning before we go in," he murmured to Janet, giving her shoulder a little squeeze. She nodded quickly, but Kitty's voice made them both pause, and returned their attention to the kitchen. "Here, Becky," she said, obviously trying to distract the baby.

Steve frowned in confusion when his older daughter held out an empty hand. He was further baffled by the mischievous looks of anticipation the other two shared, but what completely floored him, was the little white ball that appeared out of nowhere. What the hell? he wondered, staring in complete disbelief.

"Oh!" Jim said suddenly, drawing the elder Wrights' attention, "I was thinking about this last night after you two went to sleep. I think I figured out a new trick!" he grinned, touching the ball with all five fingers. Kitty and Becky both smiled when different colored patches appeared on the softly glowing surface, then laughed delightedly when he poked his index finger into the ball and stirred, making the colors swirl together in a crazy tie-dye effect. Rebecca was especially impressed. "Becky ty! Becky ty!" she exclaimed, current trauma forgotten.

"We'll play later, I promise," Kitty said, snuffing the multi-colored sphere with an air of furtive nervousness. "Now smile before Mom and Dad get here," she said, ruffling her sister's curls and effectively snapping her parents out of their shock.

"What was that?" Steve croaked, turning to Janet for an explanation, but she just spread her hands helplessly, looking as bewildered as he felt.

Severus Snape hurried toward the Headmaster's office, a piece of parchment clasped tightly in his hand, and his robes billowing out behind him.

It was time. He'd just received instructions from the Dark Lord himself, and he strongly suspected that something was going to happen in a matter of days. Severus wasn't idiotic enough to question his orders, of course, and Voldemort wasn't considerate enough to state what they would be used for, but he had been told to make several volatile potions. All of them would be useful in an attack, and all of them had to be used within a week of brewing for maximum potency.

Snape smiled grimly as he reached the stone gargoyle that guarded the Headmaster's office. With luck this whole fiasco would be over soon. Once the Death Eaters knew Potter's relatives had relocated, the need for total secrecy would be over and the Order would be able to conduct its search for the little reprobate more openly.

As he whispered the password and mounted the spiral staircase, the potion master's smile grew positively vicious. He hoped he would be allowed to deal with the boy. Any other Order member would be much too easy on him. Dumbledore himself would probably let the little urchin dance away unscathed, and that would never do. No, Severus decided as he knocked on the doorframe and let himself into Albus' office, he and Potter would definitely have words, and when he was through the boy would think long and hard before repeating this sort of behavior.

Glancing around, the potions professor soon spotted Dumbledore. He was standing in front of the fireplace engaged in a call. Not wanting to interrupt, Snape stood to the side, seeking the shadows out of habit, and observed as Professor Dumbledore conversed with Arthur Weasley.

"...I assumed he could be trusted and told him more than was prudent before making sure. I have no excuse but my own stupidity," Weasley was saying. The self-reproach evident in the red-haired wizard's voice caught Snape's attention immediately. He wondered what had happened. Had the entire plan come undone?

Dumbledore sighed tiredly, drawing his attention. His rather resigned body language did not inspire confidence, nor did his words. "We shall simply have to make the best of it, Arthur," he replied. "Perhaps since he considers the matter frivolous he will not choose to bring it to the Minister's attention," he added, clearly trying to bolster the other man's spirits.

Arthur, however, didn't appear to want his spirits bolstered, nor was he finished being upset. "Can we take that risk?" he pressed, sounding even more stressed than before. "I told him not to bother, but if he sends someone to check on Harry everything will be revealed!"

"That will happen regardless," Dumbledore pointed out. "I had hoped to keep the Guest of Honor in the dark until after the Surprise Party, but a good plan must be flexible and allow for the unexpected." He paused to mull things over for a moment before speaking again. "The procedures set in place when Harry was hidden should still be in effect," he said at length. "Any visiting witch or wizard will be required to check in with Arabella Figg. Perhaps that can be used to our advantage."

"Perhaps," Weasley agreed, nodding and sounding a little happier now. "Shall I contact her?" he offered.

"Yes, please do," Albus said gratefully. "I shall be on the lookout for an owl from Amos--when is Cedric's service scheduled again?"

"In late August. Right before the children return to Hogwarts."

"Hmm. Well, it's Harry's decision, of course, but I think I am safe in sending a tentative acceptance," the Headmaster speculated. "I would like to think that this matter will be sorted out before the new term begins," he added, a hint of his usual good humor returning.

"I'll second that," Arthur agreed wholeheartedly.

Dumbledore nodded then sighed, becoming somber again. "I am sorry for any friction I may have caused, Arthur," he apologized sincerely. "That was never my intent."

"Thank you, Albus, but I think this was just the catalyst. It's obvious that he's been keeping things bottled up inside for a long time. Things I never knew bothered him so much. Hopefully when we've both cooled off, we'll be able to sort it all out," the other wizard assured, then he said his goodbyes and vanished with a small pop.

Snape had all but forgotten he hadn't really announced himself until Dumbledore addressed him without turning. "I do wish you wouldn't lurk in the shadows, Severus," the Headmaster chided lightly, making his potions professor jump guiltily.

I hate it when he does that! Snape growled, cursing his own carelessness. He'd gotten so intrigued with who had been told what and possible ripple effects from such action that he'd allowed himself to become distracted. Something he couldn't afford to do under any circumstances at a Death Eater meeting. Stifling an annoyed sigh, he glided forward to where Dumbledore stood. "My apologies, Headmaster."

Albus acknowledged him with a nod. "You heard, I presume?"

"Part of it," Snape admitted. "Who was he foolish enough to trust?"

"His middle son, Percy. Arthur believed the boy might help us gain access to Harry's folder, but unfortunately he was incorrect. Percy is inclined to believe the Minister's version of events," Dumbledore summarized, looking worried and disappointed.

Snape made a little noise of condescension. "Obliviate him," he recommended. "We cannot risk him being able to keep his mouth shut."

"I am not certain preserving the plan is worth Minister Fudge knowing young Mr. Weasley has been tampered with," Albus returned easily. "Obliviating him might lend undue credence to his words. I am certain, however, that you did not come to discuss Mr. Percy Weasley. What can I do for you, Severus?"

"I was summoned this morning and thought you'd want to know the details straightaway," Snape reported, after pausing to gather his thoughts. He felt both annoyed and inexplicably warmed when Dumbledore frowned lightly and swept him with an assessing look as soon as he made his announcement.

Shaking his head impatiently, he waved off the older wizard's concern. "Don't trouble yourself, Albus. It was a short, informal meeting for the express purpose of issuing orders. It isn't in his best interest to have my hands shaking or my wits addled when I'm working, so he almost never curses me when he wants potions brewed." Getting back on track, he indicated the parchment he still had in his hand. "We have had hints that the Dark Lord is planning an attack for a while now. Everyone, myself included, assumed he was going to immediately go after Potter, but now I'm not so sure."

Dumbledore nodded seriously, taking a seat in one of the comfortable chairs by the fireplace and gesturing for Severus to do the same. "Has he taken you into his confidence, then?" he inquired.

"No, he's being very tight-lipped. He seems to trust Pettigrew to a certain extent, probably because that little worm has as much to lose if they're exposed, but even that has its limits. I don't even think he's told his inner circle any details," Snape continued, raising a speculative eyebrow. "Clues up to now seemed to point to an attack on Potter's residence on his birthday, but now I am not certain of the time or the target," he confessed, handing the list to Albus. "These potions seem to suggest a different type of plan."

Dumbledore's eyebrows lifted sharply as he perused the list: Veritaserum, ward weakeners, fire bombs, paralyzing gas... "Nasty," he commented, absently stroking his beard. "Very nasty indeed. It does beg one to question why he is using potions instead of spells, though. It seems to add an unnecessary level of complexity."

"I wondered myself," Severus admitted, leaning forward and indicating a particular item. "The choice of this ward weakener is odd as well. It is more suited to breaking out of warded structures, not into them. In fact," he added, sneering a little at the vernacular, "it's common name is 'Jailbreak Juice'."

"You think Azkaban might be his first target?" Albus asked, frowning at the notion.

"I don't know, although I do believe he will stage an assault there sooner or later. He wants to draw the Dementors over to his side, and several Death Eaters are still incarcerated there. It would serve a dual purpose," Snape speculated, hoping with everything in him that he would not be expected to participate. If he never had to see that godforsaken place again, it would be too soon.

Albus sighed and ran a weary hand over his eyes. "Voldemort has always been difficult to accurately predict," he remarked, frowning into the fireplace for a few minutes, then shaking his head in frustration. "I do not see the connection at this moment, but I'm afraid you aren't catching me at my best, either."

Snape frowned a bit, noticing for the first time that this was quite true. The Headmaster looked a little rough around the edges, as if he hadn't gotten sufficient sleep the night before. There was a certain fatigue in his manner, his robes were rumpled, and he had dark shadows under his normally twinkling blue eyes. "Albus, are you feeling well?" he asked uncertainly.

"What? Oh, yes. Of course," Dumbledore responded, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a small yawn. "I had trouble sleeping, so I reviewed the Pensieve contents Molly, Arabella, and young Ronald were kind enough to provide. Not too long after that, Dobby the House-Elf and Kingsley Shacklebolt returned from an errand I sent them on bringing even more evidence to review," he said, gesturing absently toward his desk.

Severus automatically followed the sweep of the other wizard's hand with his eyes, and noticed an odd assortment of containers on and

beside his desk. Several small Pensieves, presumably from last night's meeting were there, along with another that looked slightly larger than standard. What captured Snape's attention the most, however, was a largish container on the floor beside the desk. It had a long wooden ladle laying across its mouth, and looked remarkably like a stone barrel.

"I'm afraid I got caught up in my perusing and never made it to bed," Dumbledore finished with a self-deprecating little grin.

Severus raised a scolding eyebrow, appalled that the Headmaster wasn't taking better care of himself, but didn't voice his disapproval. Anything he said about this particular issue would be hypocritical in the extreme, and would probably encourage Albus to scold him the next time he stayed up brewing a tricky potion or researching ingredients.

"Did the Pensieves reveal anything of use?" he asked instead, wanting to change the subject.

Dumbledore didn't reply immediately. Instead, he rose and walked to his desk, running a hand around the lip of the stone barrel. "I have been able to answer some questions, and verify some of Sirius', Arabella's, and Remus' conjectures," he said, when Snape followed, "but for every question I managed to answer, ten others came to take its place.

"I was able to verify Remus' chain of events. He pegged it more closely than he knew. Harry traveled to Surrey alone and discovered the property was vacant. That was what Arabella saw when her locator clock indicated he was back at Privet Drive and we erroneously assumed all was well. He tried to seek shelter or assistance at Arabella's soon after that, but she had already returned to Hogwarts. When he found her house empty, he caught the Knight Bus, intending to go to the Leaky Cauldron. It's maddening!" he complained with a frustrated shake of his head. "I'd wager they missed each other by half an hour, maybe less."

Snape couldn't believe what he'd just heard. It had been a possibility all along, of course, but he'd never really believed it. There just had to

be another explanation. "Potter's relatives really abandoned him?" he asked incredulously. "He didn't just refuse to accompany them?"

Albus shook his head, looking impossibly weary and very, very sad. "No, Severus. He did not refuse. I think I might have preferred that, actually. Harry is young and could have been forgiven a bit of headstrong recklessness. As it turns out, he wasn't given a choice or even the luxury of a warning. His aunt and uncle panicked and ran when they received my letter advising them of Voldemort's rebirth, and the outcome of the TriWizard Tournament."

"You interrogated his relatives, then?" Snape asked in confusion. Dumbledore had specifically ordered that the Dursleys be left alone, for the time being anyway. He didn't usually contradict his own instructions.

"No, I got that information from an independent witness," Albus replied, nodding at two unlabeled Pensieves. They were sitting on his desk beside the ones marked "Molly Weasley", "Arabella Figg", and "Ronald Weasley". Snape frowned lightly when he noticed the last two containers didn't seem to hold the characteristic silver strands of human thought. Instead, they held a denser, weightier substance that strongly resembled liquid pewter.

"What is that, Albus?" he asked, after failing despite his best efforts to identify the Pensieves' contents.

"Memories...well, impressions, really," Albus said, correcting himself. "I shall have to ask Dobby to help me sort it out later once he's rested. This process is terribly inefficient for human magic, especially when there's so much of it," he said, waving absently at the stone barrel by his desk. With a start, Snape realized it was filled with the same matter. Merlin! Even if that came from more than one person, there must be years worth of memories in that thing! he thought, aghast.

"Do you recall the conversation we had on the fifteenth, when Arabella discovered Harry's relatives had relocated?" Severus blinked as Albus' question broke into his thoughts.

"Yes, of course," he replied. "How could I forget? That was the day I discovered Memory Potions and Calming Potions should not be mixed.**"

Albus chuckled, then sobered again. "You have a talent for picking up subtle clues, Severus," he said, retrieving his wand and holding it over Molly Weasley's memories. "Since I received my first letter from Harry, I had some rather unpleasant suspicions, and our meeting that day did little to dispel them," he said, bringing up a memory from the bowl. "Tell me what you think of this."

Snape did as he was told, and soon found himself viewing Molly Weasley, her youngest four children, and Harry Potter. "All right dears, let's go then," Molly Weasley directed, over the muted din of King's Cross Station. He watched idly as she turned and headed for what he presumed was the exit, turning every now and then to make sure everyone was accounted for, and stopping when she noticed Harry was lagging behind. He jogged up to her when she called to him, and informed her that his uncle had just arrived.

"Stop," Dumbledore commanded, freezing the memory. "Watch Harry carefully here," he instructed when Snape looked at him questioningly. "Note his facial expression and listen to what he says. It's very subtle."

Severus wondered what Albus was on about, but did as he was asked and focused on the Brat-Who-Lived as the memory continued. He noted Potter's obvious reluctance to part company with the red-headed family, and smirked a bit when Molly finally put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder and asked if he wanted her to walk over with him.

"No, thanks all the same," Potter refused, shaking his head. "Uncle Vernon will likely be angr-uh, in a hurry to leave..."

Severus scowled at the image. "Again," he ordered, bending closer to the memory floating above the small Pensieve and watching intently when Albus obligingly played it again.

"Quickly now, what was Harry going to say before he changed his mind?" Dumbledore asked, carefully gauging his reaction.

"Angry," Severus said, blurting out his first impression. He'd bet two measures of Unicorn horn that Potter had been about to say 'Uncle Vernon will be angry' before he'd stopped himself. The boy also appeared to be horrified at the very notion of Mrs. Weasley walking over with him.

Snape was honest enough with himself to admit he probably would have dismissed that bit as the typical 'how dare you treat me like a child' mentality of adolescence if Albus hadn't focused his attention. Molly evidently thought so as well, because after a brief flash of annoyance crossed her face, she simply embraced the boy, telling him she'd see him soon, and instructing him to keep in touch.

Snape rubbed his chin as he watched the interaction. Potter clearly didn't want to be treated like a child, so that was undeniably part of it, but something in the boy's tone and body language suggested there might be something more. Odd. It was almost as if he was trying to shield her . But why? And what from?

Dumbledore nodded in response to his opinion on Potter's halted sentence. "That was my reaction as well," he said, watching as the Weasley children said goodbye and Harry stood waving before fading from sight. "I just wanted a second opinion," he went on, looking like he would not have minded being proven wrong. "That was the last time Harry was seen--by a human, I should say. This stubborn bird knows Mr. Potter's location but will not divulge it," he said, directing the last bit at Fawkes who had swooped over and settled on his perch. "I have threatened to pluck him, but as you can see, he is far from concerned."

"You can speak to him?" Snape asked curiously, looking between Albus and Fawkes. It was something he had wondered in the past, but somehow never got around to asking. The firebird noticed the attention and paused in the act of grooming his feathers. Albus smiled fondly and shook his head in gentle exasperation when Fawkes favored the two wizards with a glance then carried on with what he was doing, obviously dismissing them.

"I have learned to interpret his sounds and read his expressions and body language," Dumbledore replied, indicating the phoenix. "The communication is sufficient, but not nearly as comprehensive as a Parseltongue with a snake or Basilisk."

"Ah," Snape responded, Dumbledore's example bringing to mind the bottles of Basilisk venom he had in his private stores. That had been a job well done, even if he said so himself. Since Gilderoy Lockhart had proven himself incompetent even before he had been hit with his own memory charm, it had fallen to the resident Potions Master to harvest any usable ingredients, and dispose of the Basilisk's carcass. The thing had been enormous, so getting rid of it was no small feat. All in all, it was a bloody miracle no one had gotten killed.

"Speaking of Basilisks, Potter and Miss Weasley were lucky to escape unscathed from the Chamber of Secrets," he commented at length, straying a little off topic. "That was a magnificent specimen. It was easily the longest one I've ever seen, and its venom was so potent I had to put reinforcing charms on the storage containers."

"Oh, I wouldn't say unscathed, Severus. Tom Riddle's memory very nearly drained the life out of Miss Weasley and Harry--" Dumbledore blinked and broke off sharply, with an arrested expression on his face. As Snape watched in amazement, all traces of fatigue fell away. The Headmaster had started to look like a man in danger of nodding off, but something had evidently clicked just now, because his eyes lost their sleepy look and sharpened considerably behind his half-moon glasses. "Severus," Albus asked slowly, with the attitude of a man reaching toward the answer to a problem, "given the strength of the poison, how long would you estimate it would take to kill a person?"

Snape was a little taken aback by the question, but considered it carefully all the same. "If a sufficient amount was injected into the skin with a needle or by the Basilisk's tooth, I'd wager the poison could kill a grown man in five minutes or less," he theorized.

"What about a child? A first or second year?" Albus pressed, watching him intently.

"A child?" Severus echoed incredulously. "A child would likely be dead instantaneously or in a matter of seconds. They would have a minute, maybe two if they were particularly robust. Why?"

"Because Harry was bitten by the Basilisk. One of its fangs pierced his upper arm when he drove Godric Gryffindor's sword through its skull."

Severus frowned, running calculations. "How deep was the puncture? If it was shallow or he was merely scratched, he would have had more time."

"I'm not sure, I didn't see the actual wound. Fawkes got to him in time and healed him in the Chamber," Dumbledore responded, still sounding very preoccupied. "He had the fang with him, when he came back, however. If memory serves, Harry appeared to have been bitten very deeply indeed. Judging from the visible bloodstains, the fang probably struck his humerus."

Not sure he'd heard correctly, Severus blinked comically and sought confirmation to Dumbledore's ludicrous assertion. "Potter was bitten to the bone by a Basilisk as a second year and he's still alive?" he demanded, incredulous disbelief coloring every syllable.

"Yes. It does seem unlikely, doesn't it?" Dumbledore speculated, frowning deeply and steepling his fingers in front of him. "I suppose I didn't dwell on it at the time because I found out very much after the fact, and Harry was obviously all right. I may have presumed this particular Basilisk's venom was weaker than the norm, but given the vehemence of your reaction that is not the case."

Severus snorted in spite of himself. "Quite, but when has Potter ever followed the rules?"

Albus gave him a mildly reproving look, then frowned thoughtfully again. "So how is it possible for a second year to survive a Basilisk bite, Severus?"

"How is it possible for an infant to survive the Killing Curse?" Snape shot back, throwing both hands into the air. "Perhaps the boy is

immortal," he suggested, only half joking. "If he can shrug off Basilisk poison, perhaps he can't be killed."

"No, according to Miss Weasley, Harry looked very weak and sick before Fawkes got to him. She was understandably concerned for his welfare," Albus countered. Abruptly he stood and headed for the fireplace. "Give me a moment please, Severus," he requested, disappearing into the fireplace with an order of "Hogwarts Hospital Wing," and reappearing a couple of minutes later with a folder.

"Potter's, I presume?" Snape asked, when Dumbledore returned to his desk and flipped the file open.

"Yes," Albus said absently, running a finger down the entries. "Hmm. Except for his encounters with the Dementors, all the rest of these entries are for injuries only...although, I suppose the Dementors' effect could be considered an injury of sorts. Wouldn't you agree, Severus?"

It took Snape a second to grasp the significance of that. When he did, his eyes narrowed. "No illnesses?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "None. Madam Pomphrey has also made several notes about how quickly he recovers from physical injury."

"So...Potter doesn't get sick?"

"No, he does..." Albus said thoughtfully. He turned to the two Pensieves filled with the strange pewter-colored liquid, and tapped the smaller one with his wand. "Hold on, this gets a little rough."

Before Snape could ask what, he was plunged into a memory with shocking force. The Headmaster's office vanished, and he found himself standing on the front step of a house.

A dark, empty, and very Muggle house.

In the middle of a blistering storm, no less.

Lovely.

What's Potter gotten me into now? he snarled inwardly, automatically flinching back from the weather before remembering that this was a memory, and the phantom rain fell without touching him.

The hoot of an owl, barely audible over the noise of the wind and rain drew his attention. Turning toward the sound, he saw a very bedraggled-looking Harry Potter and an equally wet snowy owl. Taken aback, Snape considered the boy before him and decided the 'pathetic half-drowned kitten look' didn't suit Potter at all. The owl hooted again, more insistently this time, and held out a leg as though demanding to deliver a message. Well at least his bird has a little sense, he thought snippily, watching the boy purse his lips thoughtfully in response to her request.

"Thanks, Hedwig, but I really don't want to send you out in this storm unless I have to," Potter said, obviously responding to the owl's suggestion. He didn't speak again for several minutes, but it was easy enough to read the play of emotions flitting across his face. Snape fancied he could hear unused gears begin to squeak and grind as the boy frowned in concentration. He appeared to consider and dismiss several options before letting loose a gigantic sneeze, and grumbling, "Hang it all!"

"This was the night of July first when Harry made his way back to Surrey. He doesn't appear to be very well at all, does he?" Dumbledore remarked, speaking for the first time. Snape frowned considerably as Potter finally seemed to make a decision, squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin. That particular pose made him look more like the stubborn, arrogant Gryffindor he was accustomed to dealing with, but Albus was right. There was no doubt the boy was showing signs of illness. Pale, flushed, soaked and sneezing, he'd wager the boy had a bad cold at the very least.

"I believe this is when he gets the idea to try to contact Arabella," Dumbledore remarked, when Potter raised a speculative eyebrow and looked intently in the direction of Wisteria Walk.

The two elder wizards watched Potter wrap his owl collect his trunk, and pelt off into the storm. "Wait," Severus blinked, suddenly hauled up short. "This memory takes place well after Molly Weasley saw Potter at King's Cross, does it not?"

"It does," Albus verified.

"And this memory is from an independent witness?"

"Correct."

"Then Molly was not the last person to see Potter the night of July first! Why did this witness not come forward before?" Severus demanded, his dark eyes flashing angrily at the thought of all the time and unnecessary effort they'd expended.

Dumbledore's shoulders slumped a bit as if the weight of the entire world was upon them. "Because, Severus, until last night, this witness had no voice. Can you not see? We are immersed fully in the memory and there is no point of view. There is no extra person in the scene." Snape continued to look uncomprehendingly at him, so Dumbledore tried again. "We are viewing the impressions of the property known as 4 Privet Drive."

Whaaaaat?? Snape shook his head in disbelief before meeting Dumbledore's gaze. "Albus, I have every respect for you as a scholar and a wizard, but I don't believe even you can read a house's mind. Particularly since there is no mind to read!"

"True, very true," the Headmaster agreed readily, making the impression fall away with a wave of his wand. Snape had just enough time to irritably reflect on Dumbledore's unprecedented talent for confusing others before the older wizard let the other shoe drop. "I cannot, but Dobby the House-Elf can."

"House-Elf?" Snape asked weakly, still struggling with the concept. Albus noticed his confusion and elaborated.

"The method is very complex, and not commonly used," he explained patiently. "House-Elves usually guard their masters' secrets very

jealously, but Dobby's 'freed' status and his devotion to Harry Potter make him a special case. He was able to successfully 'communicate' after a fashion with Harry's former residence, and gather the house's impressions of his life there. I requested it hoping to gain some insight into Harry's disappearance when he became untraceable."

"And Shackelbolt?"

"Was a credible, verifiable witness," Dumbledore said, shrugging. "His word that Dobby tapped the right houses will be good enough for many should this evidence be necessary in court. I had been planning to try and tap the house even before, when I was endeavoring to find sufficient evidence to have Harry removed from the Dursleys' care, but the more acute crisis guaranteed Kingsley's cooperation."

Warming to the subject, Snape indicated the larger Pensieve. "What is the other?"

"Arabella Figg's property on Wisteria Walk. As you can see, Harry spent considerably less time there," he explained. "The mechanics are beyond my comprehension, but from what I understand, this cannot always be done with guaranteed success. The structure must be forced to 'remember' a person who dwells, or has dwelled within it. The age of the structure and number of inhabitants it has had over its life complicates the process. It would be very nearly impossible to force Hogwarts to recall a specific student, for example."

"So did you find any...evidence of Potter being mistreated?" Snape asked reluctantly, not liking the cold ball of dread that was forming in his stomach.

"I have not attempted it as yet," Dumbledore admitted. "As I said, the process of searching through non-sentient memories is difficult. I had just managed to piece together Harry's activities the night of July first when Arthur Floo'd me."

Indicating the long-handled wooden ladle laying across the mouth of the stone barrel, Dumbledore continued. "Dobby said he would assist me later, but left me this tool to use on my own. He's a dear little

fellow," the Headmaster said fondly. "Before he left he told me not to worry, and he knew Harry Potter was just fine." Getting back to the matter at hand, he picked up the ladle. "This is supposed to be able to find impressions that I specify," he explained, noting Snape's interest.

"You plan to look for signs mistreatment?"

"Yes," Albus said sadly, transfiguring several additional Pensieves on his desk. "Was Harry Potter ever beaten by Vernon or Petunia Dursley?" he asked, tapping the ladle with his wand and slipping it into the metallic liquid. He stirred a few times, then brought the device out, looking amazed when it was completely empty.

"Hmm. Try 'struck' instead, it's more general. And include the cousin in your queries," Snape advised. Dumbledore tried again, with 'Was Harry Potter ever struck by his muggle relatives?' and this time came up with a generous spoonful. Frowning, he poured it into one of the waiting Pensieves.

When he moved to spell the ladle again, Snape stopped him. "Wait Albus. Take a small look first. Make sure it isn't Potter and his cousin engaging in boyish foolishness."

"Very well," the old wizard said, setting the ladle aside and reaching for his wand with obvious reluctance. As he prodded the contents of the Pensieve, his office fell away again, and was replaced by the same Muggle home he'd seen just moments ago. As he and Albus stood curiously on the front steps, a Muggle transport device arrived carrying a much younger Harry Potter, a horse-faced woman and another boy who had to be Potter's cousin. Snape sneered disdainfully as he observed the obviously overweight boy. Another obnoxious brat, he noted sourly. It must run in the family.

Refocusing his attention, he noticed the woman was obviously angry about something. Her motions were jerky and irritable as she unlocked the front door and herded both boys into the house. As he and Albus followed the family inside the house and back to the kitchen, Snape was struck by the wealth of photographs on the mantel and walls. Everywhere he looked that blond-haired brat was

grinning insipidly back at him. It wasn't until later that he would realize that there wasn't a picture of Potter in sight.

Potter's aunt, meanwhile, put her shopping bags on the kitchen table. Her expression softened for a second when she bade the other boy to "run along and play," then she rounded on her nephew, slapping him just as hard as she could. Snape and Dumbledore watched in shocked silence as young Harry was knocked off his feet by the force of the blow. When the boy tried to defend himself, his aunt proceeded to scold and belittle him to such a degree, even the jaded Potions Master found himself appalled.***

Of course if he was appalled, then Dumbledore was in a towering rage. Albus, Snape noted, was looking uncharacteristically bleak as the scene unfolded. Potter's aunt was probably very fortunate that she was well out of reach at that particular moment. She had raised an ugly red mark on the boy's face-- "Wait!" Reaching for his wand, he raised it instantly, blurting the command to freeze the memory.

"What is it, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, frowning, then he caught the younger man's body language. "What did you see?"

Without replying, Snape stalked over and knelt next to the frozen memory of Harry Potter. The boy was staring up at his aunt with wide green eyes, and was caught in the act of wiping away tears. "Look here, Albus," Snape said, indicating the swath of perfectly normal skin left in the wake of the boy's small fingers, and the angry red mark beyond.

"Merciful Heaven," Albus breathed. "No wonder no one ever noticed injuries. He has some sort of latent healing ability!"

"Mmm," Snape agreed. "But is it his touch or his tears?" he asked pragmatically.

"I don't know. Perhaps we can make a determination when we find him," Dumbledore sighed, letting the impression fall away. He sat heavily in his chair and for once looked to be at a loss. "How will I ever tell Sirius?"

* This was back in Chapter 12: What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate.

** When Snape interrogated Wormtail in Chapter 15: Mr. Wrong.

*** If the Petunia slapping Harry bit sounds familiar, it should. Dumbledore randomly scooped out the scene Harry recalls in Chapter 14: Ms Wright.

Chapter 26 - Be Careful What You Ask For...(Part 1 of 2)

Sunday, July 23, 1995

...

"You saw that, right?"

Janet Wright glanced into the kitchen, then met her husband's eyes again.

"Tell me you saw something, at least," he tried again, his whispered tone almost pleading, "because if you didn't I'm more jet lagged than I thought and may require hospitalization."

That earned him a nervous chuckle. "No, I definitely saw something," she verified. "I just can't explain it offhand."

"Oh, good. I was worried for a second there." He paused briefly then tried, "Is that some new toy?"

She shook her head. "Nothing I bought for her."

"Could he have given it to her?" Steve asked next, nodding in Sparky's direction.

"Jimmy?" Janet glanced into the kitchen, then shrugged. "It's possible, I guess, but I don't think so. Besides, Becky didn't act like it was anything new."

"She got rid of it awful damn fast. Where did it go?"

"I don't know. She doesn't have any pockets in those pajamas, and it isn't on the floor."

Husband and wife shared a long, searching look.

"So by all appearances," Steve stated at length, "our oldest daughter can produce and dispose of a white light on demand."

"Um, yes. I'd say that's a fair statement," Jan agreed faintly.

"And the babysitter can make it change color."

She nodded slowly, feeling a little dazed, then added, "Becky, too if I'm reading her reaction correctly."

"Hmm. Good point," he concurred, then frowned. "Was it my imagination or did Kitty act like she doesn't want us to know?"

"No, she definitely seemed nervous."

"Why would she hide something like this from us?"

"How should I know?" she hissed, frustrated and stung by his words. "I found out about this exactly when you did."

"True."

"So what now?"

"Well, they're expecting us to come down, and we're going to look awfully silly if they find us lurking in the hall like this," he pointed out reasonably. "Let's back up and make some noise so they know we're coming in, then we can get this all straightened out."

"Okay."

Janet followed her husband back a few paces, then both of them hurried back, making more noise than before. Impatiently trotting ahead, she reached the kitchen first. "Is everything all right in here?" she called as she hurried in, not quite keeping the anxiety out of her voice.

"Mama!"

Janet smiled gently as she watched Becky run toward her, arms outstretched. Sparky had evidently gotten up in the interim, and was replacing the ice in the freezer while Kitty refilled the sugar bowl. Leaning down she tried to pick up the agitated toddler, but Rebecca

shook her head. "What is it, sweetheart?" she asked, frowning, when her daughter latched onto her hand instead and tugged insistently.

"Parky gotta boo-boo," Rebecca said, dragging Janet over toward the uncertain-looking teen. "Look!"

"Yeah, Becky whacked him in the face with the broom," Kitty clarified, putting the lid on the sugar bowl and joining them.

"Didn't mean to!" Becky returned angrily.

"Of course you didn't," Janet soothed, shooting the older girl a quelling look, and frowning a bit when Jim seemed to reflexively tense at her approach. "Are you all right, Sparks?" she asked concernedly, noting that the boy seemed unusually nervous.

He blinked at that as though taken by surprise, and his wariness diminished a jot. "Yes, ma'am," he responded at length. "It was nothing--just a little accident," he went on, seeming to gain confidence when Janet just looked at him questioningly. "Becky got upset when she realized she'd hit me is all."

Nodding, Janet lifted her younger daughter and propped her on one hip so she could see the object of her concern properly. "He's all right, darling, see?" she coaxed, putting her free hand on Sparky's shoulder when Becky still didn't look completely convinced.

"But I made him cwy!" she confessed miserably.

Don't laugh, don't laugh, don't you dare laugh! Janet ordered herself, struggling mightily to keep from doing just that. Becky was completely serious, and poor Jim already looked like he wished there was a convenient hole he could crawl into. Laughter probably wouldn't be taken well by either party. Even Kitty, who was prone to nervous giggling seemed to realize this, remaining silent as she came over and patted her sister's leg.

"When someone gets hit on the nose it usually makes their eyes water," Janet casually supplied, noting the red mark on Sparky's face and speaking to him as much as Becky. "They taught me that in my

self defense class. Now, do you think there's anything we can do to make things better?" she asked, trying to hint to Rebecca that an apology might be in order.

Becky had something else in mind, however. "Kisses," she declared, beaming. "Mama kisses."

Oh. Of course, Janet thought, glancing between the perfectly earnest baby, and the rather horrified-looking young man in front of her. Any calamity capable of producing tears automatically demanded lots of TLC as far as Becky was concerned. Still, Jan hesitated. It wasn't that she minded granting her daughter's request, but something about the boy's demeanor told her that he probably wouldn't tolerate a sudden invasion of his personal space.

Deciding to take a less intrusive route, Janet brought her free hand to her lips, planted a tiny kiss on her index finger, then slowly reached out and transferred the "kiss" to the injury. He stayed still and allowed the touch, but she couldn't help but notice how he tracked her hand with his eyes. "There," she declared brightly. "Better now?"

"Erm, yes. Thanks," he said, sounding a little bewildered, but playing along. Probably for Becky's benefit, Jan mused, wondering again about the cause of his upset. Trying to lighten the mood, she wagged her eyebrows and commented, "Great stuff, mommy spit, wouldn't you agree, Spark?" When he blinked in confusion and looked questioningly at her, she elaborated, "all purpose healing agent," finally earning a chuckle and a small smile.

"And let's not forget 'emergency facial cleanser'," Steve remarked from the doorway, making his presence known for the first time.

Janet jumped in surprise along with the kids, then immediately felt foolish. She'd gotten completely sidetracked, darn it! This certainly wasn't the longest time she'd ever been separated from Steve, but it was evidently going to take a day or two to get used to having him around again. Grinning sheepishly at her husband, she shrugged apologetically while the girls squealed in delight. "Daddy!"

Wasting no time, Kitty dashed across the kitchen at a full run, while Becky struggled to get out of Janet's arms. "Wan' down, Mama!" she fussed impatiently. "Wan' down!"

"All right, all right," Jan chuckled, setting Rebecca on her feet while Steve caught Kitty in a big bear hug and swung her around. "Head's up, Dad," she warned playfully, as Becky made a beeline in his direction. Not missing a beat, Steve set Katrina down then swooped the toddler up in his arms, tossing her in the air and making her shriek with laughter.

Smiling indulgently, Janet stood aside and looked on while her daughters basked in their father's attention. They really had missed him, poor things. As mom, she was the parent of choice when they were tired or ill or otherwise out of sorts. Steve was the one they went to when they wanted to play.

Shaking her head fondly, Jan looked on a little longer then sniffed questioningly. Apparently whatever Sparky had in the oven was pretty close to being done. She turned slightly, intending to ask him how much longer it needed to bake, but the question died unasked when she spotted him standing off to one side with a sad little smile on his face.

Over the course of their acquaintance, Janet had "caught" Jim watching her interact with Kitty and Becky several times, but hadn't thought much of it. She'd always been distracted with the kids, and he always noticed immediately when she looked back, smiling as though merely amused by her family's antics. This time, she'd obviously intruded on a private moment when he thought himself unobserved.

Unsure what to do, she stayed half-turned, watching the boy with her peripheral vision. The unconscious longing in his eyes was painful to see, but mercifully brief. Abruptly he seemed to snap out of it, giving himself an impatient little shake, and casting around for something to do. As Janet continued to observe, he bent to retrieve the forgotten broom, and set about sweeping up the spilled sugar.

Deciding this would be a good opportunity to talk, she went to fetch the dustpan. "Here," she said, holding it for him, and ignoring yet another look of bewildered surprise. "So, how did everything go last night?"

"It went well, I think, all things considered," he replied with a mysterious little smile, then his expression became more guarded. "I'm afraid I did let Becky get overtired, though."

"It happens," Janet shrugged, dumping the sugar into the trash. "That suggestion was more for your sanity than anything else. She can be a handful once she gets past a certain point. There have been a few times when I've considered rocking her to sleep--with real rocks," she teased outrageously, grinning impishly when she startled a laugh out of the boy.

"Yes, well, fortunately it didn't come to that," he remarked dryly, looking up when the kettle whistled and moving toward the stove. "I think everything should be ready now," he commented, changing the subject.

Janet nodded, watching while he took the kettle off the heat, and removed a pan of cinnamon rolls from the oven. She turned to call the rest of the family, but there was no need. Something, probably the kettle, had caught their attention, because Steve and the girls were coming over.

"Cocoa!" Kitty grinned, as she neared. "Dad, will you please make me a cup of hot cocoa?"

"Sure, sweets," he returned with a grin and a flick of his fingers. "POOF! You're a cup of hot cocoa!"

"Daaaaaad!"

Janet rolled her eyes at the two of them, and turned back to the stove when she heard a muffled snort. Steve's moldy old joke had evidently tickled Jim's funny bone, but he was trying very hard not to show it for some reason. Probably thinks it wouldn't be proper, Jan speculated,

watching in amusement as the boy picked up the spatula and poked at the bacon, obviously trying to distract himself.

"Well, if your mother will kindly show me where she put everything, I'll be happy to oblige," Steve was saying in response to his decidedly unappreciative audience. Taking her cue, Janet gathered some cups, a spoon and the cocoa mix and arranged them on the counter in front of her husband. "Thanks," Steve said, then lowered his voice. "So, did you ask him?"

"No, he's unusually jumpy today," she murmured in response, standing beside Steve and sliding her arm around his waist while they were talking. "I think he's nervous about meeting you. Let's get him settled down first, then we can see what's going on. There has to be some explanation."

"Okay," Steve said agreeably as he finished spooning the brown powder into the cups. "I'm ready for the kettle now. Shall we?"

Nodding, Janet went back to the stove. "Jimmy, I'd like to introduce you to my husband, Stephen Wright," she said with a smile, indicating the man beside her. "Steve, this is Jim Patterson, otherwise known as 'Sparky'."

"Minerva!"

The Hogwarts Deputy Headmistress looked up in surprise, then put down her quill and hurried over to the fireplace in her office. She didn't even have to look to know the identity of the caller. The "Min-NOI-va!" pronunciation gave it away in an instant.

"Abigail Penstone!" she greeted, gracing the calling witch with a warm smile. "What brings you to my Floo?"

"Well, I wanted to see how you were holding up, and I had a little registration matter that I need your advice on," the little blonde replied, studying her friend with concerned blue eyes. She was a Bronx-raised witch who was currently Head Registrar at the Salem Witches' Institute.

"How can I help, Abby?" she asked curiously, wondering what the matter was.

"Well I was just going over my list of potential Muggle invitees for the next couple of years. One of them moved recently, and will be living in London for a time. I was going to send the standard letter outlining the educational opportunities here in the States, but I thought I might include Hogwarts as a possibility if you don't mind. Her parents might be more agreeable to the idea if she attended school locally."

Minerva shrugged. "I can speak with Albus if you like, but I see no problem with that."

"Fine. I didn't think you'd mind, but I didn't want to assume," Abigail smiled. "Maybe we can arrange to send out a joint welcoming committee--bring out the big guns. Rumor has it that this family may be tough to convince."

"Really?" McGonagall asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yep. We approached the family of one of the parents back when they came of age and were turned down flat."

The Deputy Headmistress frowned lightly, considering this. While not unheard of, it was uncommon for Muggle parents to refuse magical training for their children. As a rule, they were usually rather taken with the idea, and enormously relieved that the oddities they'd been trying to rationalize away had an explanation.

Of course, for every rule there was an exception. Occasionally magical educators ran across parents--and children for that matter--who had to be convinced. In these cases, the children generally had fewer magical "accidents" for a variety of reasons. Some were late bloomers, others were rather weak magically, and still others had an intrinsic degree of control. The worst-case scenario by far was when a child had been traumatized somehow. They were the ones who instinctively shied away from magic as a result, burying it deep in their psyches, often with the memory that caused the fear.

In any case, parents who had observed no strange events or behaviors were naturally more difficult to convince than the poor souls who were sometimes literally beside themselves with bewildered confusion and helpless frustration.

"I have the information here," Abby said, flipping rapidly through a file and interrupting the Deputy Headmistress' musings. "The record cites health concerns as the main issue for refusal. The parents were uncomfortable about sending their child so far away, especially since it didn't seem necessary. Even the satellite school in their region was too far away for their liking. We might have to deal with a similar attitude now that they have magical children of their own, especially if the condition was hereditary."

"A joint effort might be best, then," Minerva agreed. "Hogwarts is primarily a boarding school, but arrangements have been made in the past for children with special needs. We'll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Sounds like a plan, Minnie. Thanks."

"Anytime, Abby--oh, wait! Speaking of Muggleborn students, you might be interested in these. I just got them back from the printer," Minerva said, hurrying back to her desk and grabbing one of the new 'Muggleborn Guides.' "Take a look, you might find it good enough to modify for your own program," she said, handing the booklet into the fire with a pair of fireplace tongs.

"Really? Better than the last one, I hope," Abigail teased, accepting the booklet, and laughing at the pointed look McGonagall gave her. "Oh, lighten up, Minnie I was only kidding. I'll be in touch about my wayward student, and thanks again."

"I look forward to it," McGonagall said, nodding as Abigail winked out. Harry Potter sat at the Wright's kitchen table and regarded the family with equal parts amusement, fondness, and confusion.

Something's...up, he thought, as he glanced discreetly around the breakfast table. Well, maybe not "up" but there's a definite difference this morning, he went on, regarding the adults in particular. It wasn't

anything huge or obvious, more of a subtle shift in mood, really, but it was there all the same.

Whatever it was.

Munching thoughtfully on a bite of bacon, Harry considered this odd new circumstance. At first he'd simply dismissed the change, blaming it on the excitement surrounding Mr. Wri--no, Steve's arrival. Kitty and Becky were practically bubbling over, and admittedly, the presence of two parents instead of just one was having a slight effect on the household dynamics Harry was used to. That part didn't bother him. What did was the subtle undercurrent of...something he was picking up from Janet and Steve in particular. Frowning lightly, Harry tried to identify the sensation. Anxiety, maybe? Confusion? Concern?

Of course, it was altogether possible that nothing was amiss. Everyone was being as friendly as ever. Nobody was carrying on like he'd suddenly contracted the plague... No one else seemed bothered at all. Maybe everything was normal. Maybe it was just him. He was dealing with a little more than he was used to, after all.

Feeling a little better, Harry considered this new option. He'd picked up the knack of assessing the mood of others around him while he lived with the Dursleys, but even then he had to wonder if he would have noticed anything out of the ordinary this morning if Becky hadn't walloped him with the broom handle. He wasn't sure exactly how it happened, but when he'd been struck, his awareness had kicked in very suddenly and clearly.

The hypersensitivity was fading now, almost completely back to normal, but he was still picking up subtle nuances--like this slight tension--that completely contradicted the obvious atmosphere. Harry wasn't sure he would have noticed anything amiss under normal circumstances, and wasn't quite sure how to interpret this additional input. Unfortunately, he had just enough information to be bloody confused by it.

And speaking of bloody...

The young wizard made sure no one was looking in his direction then scrunched his nose experimentally. It was still a little tender, but his discomfort was fading fast. Thank goodness! Harry thought wryly. Perhaps if he was lucky, it wouldn't leave a noticeable mark. He'd be teased for days if Tom--or worse, Cassie--found out the tiny girl had very nearly bloodied his nose for him!

Still, it had been a close thing. Becky hadn't intended to hurt him, of course, but she'd landed a pretty solid blow all the same. Thanks to Dudley and his gang, Harry was intimately familiar with the telltale liquid feeling that typically heralded a nosebleed. At the time he'd been quite sure he could feel one coming on.

On balance, he decided his nose must have just been running a bit in response to his watering eyes. When he'd reflexively brought his hand up to pinch his nose shut, it hadn't been necessary.

Good thing, too, Harry mused. If Becky got that upset over a few tears, she probably wouldn't take the sight of blood very well at all.

Sneaking a glance at the dark-haired toddler, Harry was pleased to see she was smiling and laughing again. Truthfully, he didn't know if being able to sense things sometimes was a blessing or a curse, but it had certainly come in handy in this case. When he'd made eye contact, suddenly he had known exactly what she was feeling--no guesswork necessary. Affection, remorse, fear of rejection, concern for his hurt... It had been amazing--quite possibly the clearest "reading" he'd ever had. He'd almost been able to pick out actual thoughts!

It was cool, certainly, but Harry wasn't sure he liked the implications, either of the ability itself or the risk of catching Professor Trelawney's attention again. She'd probably insist on tutoring him personally. Oh, well. It could be worse. It could be Snape, he reasoned practically, then considered his companions again.

The Wrights had initially subjected him to loads of 'get to know you' questions about home, friends, school and the like, but eventually they'd tapered off and were mostly ignoring him at the moment.

Well, not ignoring exactly, Harry amended absently. They were just chatting amongst themselves about various topics that he could contribute very little to, like Steve's trip over, local places Janet had scouted out, and the work left to do on the house.

Harry didn't take offense, though. They'd been apart for at least two weeks, so naturally they would want to catch up. Besides, his relatives had never included him in their mealtime conversations, preferring instead to pointedly ignore him. He was more than used to this sort of thing. In a really twisted sort of way, it was almost comfortingly familiar. "Homey", even. Much more so than earlier when they tried to draw him in--Whoa!

Harry blinked in surprise, stopping his ramblings cold when he realized where they were going. Bloody hell, Potter, that's just wrong! he thought with a slight shudder. The fact that everyone was sitting at the breakfast table pajama-clad and barefoot was proof that the Wright House was quite different from the Dursley's! He smirked a bit, imagining Aunt Petunia's reaction. "I set a civilized table, thank you very much," she'd say with a disapproving frown. "At the very least dressing gowns and slippers should be worn!"

Oh, yes. Much too casual for her tastes.

Trying not to snicker aloud, Harry glanced at Becky again, noting as he did so that she was pulling on her father's sleeve with a very sticky hand. "'Parky let Becky do ice," she informed Steve seriously, pointing at her cup once she had his attention. "I puts free pieces in alla cups."

"Well, so you did," Steve said, picking up his juice cup and taking a peek inside, after trying in vain to brush the mess off his sleeve. Including Kitty in his address, he invited, "So, speak to me daughters. What did you do last night?"

Kitty and Becky didn't need to be to be asked twice. Brightening at their father's request, they practically tripped over each other trying to tell him everything at once. Grinning at the girls' chatter, Harry listened as they told their parents about some of the things they'd done that morning and the night before. Since he wasn't being

maligned too badly and no mention was being made of how he'd "cleaned" the living room, he left them to it, listening with half an ear, and letting his mind wander back again.

Maybe he was so accustomed to the Dursleys' fearful loathing that he was automatically expecting the worst and creating problems where there were none. The lingering hint of unease and confusion might have something to do with the parents being startled awake by their youngest child's panicked cries. It could also be a few stray "first meeting" nerves, or perhaps he was simply feeling echoes of his own stupid insecurities.

He hadn't said as much to anyone, but Harry had been horribly nervous about meeting the man of the house. He'd grown rather fond of his new friends in the short time he'd known them, and had been irrationally convinced that Janet's husband would hate him on sight.

Happily, all his fears had proven groundless. His aunt and uncle had always adopted a "guilty until proven innocent" stance with him, so he'd recoiled instinctively when Becky's horrified wails rang through the house, fully expecting the elder Wrights to burst into the kitchen flinging accusations and assuming the worst. Even in the midst of trying to calm Rebecca he'd been braced, primed and ready for a confrontational, negative reaction...

...so naturally the opposite had occurred.

They'd come rushing into the kitchen as expected, but the overall attitude had been one of concern, not condemnation. Steve had initially hung back, for which Harry was grateful, letting Janet handle the initial assessment and offer, erm, "medical aid" before announcing his presence.

Smiling softly, Harry touched his nose where Janet had, then sobered again. His reaction to Steve and his girls had been rather unexpected. Well, okay, not really unexpected, just stronger than normal. He usually did a fair job of accepting the fact that others had loving families and he...didn't, but today it had been harder.

Feeling inexplicably bereft and very much the outsider, he'd had to stifle an envious sigh and grimly battle down a surge of wistful longing when Steve twirled Kitty around and tossed Becky in the air. He'd told himself that he was being stupid of course, but hang it all! It was bloody hard to be on the outside looking in all the time! It seemed like he'd been there his whole life.

Because of the time he'd spent in the cupboard, or perhaps in spite of it, Harry had developed a rather vivid imagination, and had a tendency toward daydreaming. When he was very young, one of his most cherished dreams had been for some loving long-lost relative to come and take him away from the Dursleys. Later, especially after being introduced to Hogwarts and the Burrow, he'd consoled himself with Ron and Hermione's friendship, and the secret, treasured goal of having a family of his own someday once he'd finished his schooling and established himself.

When Sirius had come into his life Third Year, it seemed as though his childhood fantasy might come true after all, but now... Now, living with Sirius and having a family of his own seemed very far away indeed. Voldemort's return further complicated matters. In his more pessimistically morbid moments, Harry sometimes wondered if he and Sirius would both survive long enough to see either dream become reality. It wasn't something he'd ever discussed with anyone, but sometimes even the idea of living long enough to finish his schooling seemed highly unlikely.

Stop it, he chided himself impatiently. This seemed to be his morning for melancholy introspection. Voldemort will win for sure if you keep that attitude. You've had a good time here, focus on that.

Good advice, but awfully hard to follow, Harry thought with a small sigh, smiling slightly as the family laughed at something in the girls' recount. At least he'd been able to shake himself out of his reverie before they caught him staring.

Once the initial hubbub died down, Janet had brought Steve over. Harry had tried to play it cool during the introduction, but had ruined the effect he was shooting for when he turned to shake the man's hand...without putting the spatula he was using down first. He'd

cringed and flushed in embarrassment, but Steve had merely chuckled and brought his own hand higher, clapping Harry on the shoulder as if he'd meant to do that all along. "I see we use the same tailor," Steve had said, indicating his own sweats and t-shirt, and the awkward moment passed.

It hadn't been a flawless meeting, Harry supposed, but it could have gone much worse. Stephen Wright was just a shade under six feet in height with Kitty's light brown hair, and Becky's gray-blue eyes. His manner was friendly enough, but he seemed to be reserving final judgement with regard to the young man in his kitchen. Harry could live with that, though. Janet's husband wasn't hostile, just...wary. Wary and protective of his family.

As he should be, Harry approved, subconsciously passing his own masculine judgement. Can't be too careful, you know. It was all right, really. One of the most profound experiences he'd had this summer was the satisfaction of being judged by his own merits and failings rather than prejudices or preconceived notions. If Steve was willing to give him a fair shake, Harry was fairly certain he'd win him over. Besides, Stephen Wright couldn't be much pickier than Flourish and Blotts' manager, Geoffrey Reed, could he?

Abruptly realizing that everyone had stopped talking, Harry looked up questioningly. Oops, what'd I miss? he wondered, glancing at Steve and Janet, who had identically contrite looks on their faces. When they noticed he was looking at them, they both smiled apologetically. After casting around for something to say, Janet broke off a piece of her cinnamon roll and popped it in her mouth.

"Mmm. This is wonderful. Absolutely marvelous," she grinned brightly, bringing the conversation back to more common ground. "You kids really did an excellent job with breakfast," she continued, beaming proudly at all three children before favoring Harry with a broad wink.

"I'll second that," Steve chimed in, catching Harry's eye and raising his cup in a subtle "toasting" motion before taking a cautious sip of the steaming cocoa inside.

Heartened, Harry acknowledged their tacit praise with a little nod and a look of pleased embarrassment. Steve and Janet were still looking a little chagrined, he noted, like they were afraid they'd insulted him by allowing themselves to get so sidetracked. If they only knew, he thought ironically. Compared to the Dursleys this is better than exemplary behavior!

Steve, meanwhile, set his cocoa down, and continued his earlier thought. "After living on fast food, airplane food and my own cooking, almost anything would be an improvement, but this beats my wildest dreams by a mile and a half," Mr. Wright declared, getting a mischievous glint in his eye. "Becky, my girl, when did you become such a fantastic cook?" he teased, kissing her hand and making her giggle happily.

Harry smiled as he watched their antics, relaxing further as the underlying tension slipped another notch, and a tremulous feeling of well-being began to take its place.

"We helped, Dad, but Sparky did most of it."

Ah, Kitty. Harry rolled his eyes at the younger girl while her parents exchanged a fond look. The Literal One. Her desire for fairness was equaled only by her desire for correctness. The Sorting Hat was probably going to have a hard time choosing between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, he theorized, before addressing the brown-haired girl.

"Why'd you go and spoil it? We were having them on!" he teased, breaking into helpless laughter with the rest of the family when Kitty crossed her arms and shot him a credible imitation of her mother's "I-Wasn't-Born-Yesterday-You-Know" look.

"Well if that's true, then I must offer my congratulations on a job well done," Stephen grinned at length, tipping an imaginary hat in Harry's direction once everyone had calmed down. "My culinary skills are limited to ground meat and barbeque grills--and no comments from the peanut gallery," he warned, shooting playful glares at his daughters and his wife.

"I didn't say a word, dear," Janet said innocently, while Kitty rolled her eyes and Becky laughed into her hands.

"Pfft. You don't have to. I can hear you thinking all the way over here."

Join the queue, Harry mused wryly, then looked up when Mr. Wright addressed him directly.

"So, Jim," Steve said conversationally, "my loving wife tells me you play on your house team."

"Yes, sir."

Steve waited a bit for Harry to elaborate then prompted, "So what's your sport? You look a little small for caber tossing or rugby...cricket, maybe? Soccer?" he speculated, studying the boy appraisingly.

"Uhhhh," Harry stalled, thinking furiously. "What do I say now?" he wondered frantically. Janet had just accepted "Sports" and "house team" and left it at that. Ironically, it was she who came to his rescue.

"What Spark's too polite to out and out say, is 'Soccer' is called 'Association Football' here," she corrected, then giggled ruefully. "Some people are very emphatic about that," she added, as though speaking from experience.

"Oh, yeah," Steve said, frowning and rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "This is going to take some getting used to, isn't it? So what do they call American football here?"

Janet's smile grew positively wicked. "Ridiculous?" she suggested impishly, her manner suggesting that this was her opinion, no matter what the British population at large thought.

Harry glanced uncertainly between the two, but this was evidently a rhetorical argument. Instead of being angry or upset, Stephen heaved a long-suffering sigh and shook his head mournfully. "This is proof that you only have so much influence over those you love," he lamented, raising his eyebrows at Harry and gently shaking Janet's

shoulder. "I've been working on this girl for twelve years or more, and she still doesn't have a sports-loving bone in her body."

Having no reply to that, Harry simply shrugged and smiled in a "Her loss" sort of way while wondering what Steve and Janet would make of Quidditch. He wasn't sure about Kitty, but Becky... If today was any indication, she had the makings of a brilliant beater--unless she ended up playing Quodpot, of course.

"Now me, I love sports," Steve went on, ignoring Janet's martyrish eye-roll. "I like to watch, I like to play--I've even coached." He looked Harry over again, and speculated, "Football, eh? So what position? Forward? Midfielder?"

"I play either, but a friend of mine says I'm a better Forward," Harry replied, thinking of Dean Thomas. His Muggleborn housemate was a huge West Ham fan, and liked to organize casual games on the school grounds in good weather.

"Mmm. Sounds like a lot of running. What kind of summer training program do you have?" Steve asked.

"Training program?" Harry echoed questioningly.

"Yeah. Your coach doesn't want you to get out of shape, right? Aren't you supposed to do some sort of conditioning over the summer break?"

"There isn't an official one, I'm afraid," Harry admitted, finally catching on. "My friends and I play practice games and work on our basic skills when we can, though."

"Ah, well, that's too bad," Steve sighed, sounding disappointed. "I was hoping you'd know where some good jogging areas were around here. Jannie hasn't had a chance to look into it. Something about being too tired to run after all that unpacking. I ask you," he teased, earning a playful cuff on the shoulder from his wife.

"So you like to exercise, I take it?" Harry asked, grinning.

Steve shrugged. "Yeah, I guess I do. I was always getting "volunteered" to lead P.T. when I was in the service. I was a trainer full time at one assignment."

Now it was Harry's turn to eye the other male appraisingly. "Cool," he grinned. "So do you hire out?" he asked, only half teasing.

"Oh, I'm sure something could be arranged," Steve grinned after pretending to consider it. "Don't worry, kid, we can fix you up."

"You do realize you've just signed on as his latest victim, don't you?" Janet remarked dryly, ignoring her husband's indignant protests, and seeming to verify Harry's growing suspicion that he might have gotten more than he bargained for.

"I don't want to be a bother," he hedged.

"No bother," Steve assured him with a shrug. "It'll be fun."

"So, Spark," Janet broke in, changing the subject, "what sights would you recommend as a native?"

"Sights?"

"Yeah. You know, touristy places," she clarified. "I only have so long before I have to start my job, and we want to make the best use of our free time. After I start working the schedule will be a little more constricted. I was just wondering what your opinion was on some of the places you've visited. Which ones are worth the trip, and what ones aren't all they're cracked up to be?"

Ah, Harry thought, pondering her question for a second before coming up empty. "I haven't been to a lot of places so I really can't help you," he admitted without thinking, then cringed and hastily tried to cover his slip. "What I mean is, my aunt and uncle never liked to take me sightseeing. They were always afraid something strange would happen," he adlibbed, hoping they'd think his relatives were just wary of being mugged or something. "I might be able to get some recommendations from some friends of mine," he offered hesitantly when Steve and Janet shared an undecipherable look.

Janet gave him a searching look, then reached out and gave his hand a little squeeze. "I'm sorry to hear that, Jim," she said, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

Harry noted absently that she tended to call him "Jim" rather than "Sparky" when she was being serious about something. "They did take me to a little zoo in Surrey once," he pointed out. "There's a nice reptile house there."

Brightening, Janet nodded with growing enthusiasm. "That might be nice, the girls like zoos." She glanced at him uncertainly, then shrugged. "If we can work around your schedule, maybe you'd like to see a few places with us. Once we figure out where we're going, of course."

"No museums!" Kitty piped up, seconded by Becky who agreed, "No zee-ums!"

"Hey, now wait just a minute," Stephen objected. "What do you mean 'no museums?'"

"Museums are boring, Dad!"

"Museums in moderation, just like everything else," Janet said firmly, heading off a squabble. "Besides, we aren't going anywhere until the house is finished. There are just a few boxes left in the living room."

Steve grinned guiltily. "And a few more coming in the mail," he admitted. "Hey!" he said, brightening suddenly, and jerking a thumb in Harry's direction. "Does the kid hire out?" he asked, trying to--

"Steve!"

--no, make that successfully getting a rise out of his wife. "Kidding! Just kidding!" he hastened to clarify, holding up his hands to ward her off when it looked like she might just strike him. "I'll deal with it, already! Sheesh!"

"Sorry, Spark," Janet chuckled. "People usually get one or two free visits before being subjected to the Wright Family Insanity."

"Yeah, well, a good sense of humor never hurt anyone," Steve retorted, grinning at his wife. "Besides, judging from your calls and e-mails, I figured you'd adopted him already."

"Well no, actually," Janet played along, winking at Becky and Kitty, "but that's a great idea! What do you say, Sparky?" she said, giving him her most winsome smile. "Can we keep you?"

Harry blinked a few times, stunned. He knew she didn't mean it in a "legal and binding" kind of way--but still! He'd never been formally asked before--well, except for Sirius, of course. George had sort of "dubbed" him an official Weasley at King's Cross, and before that it had been somewhat implied, but that wasn't quite the same.

Of course after last night it was entirely possible that neither Sirius nor the Weasleys wanted anything to do with him.

Stifling a sigh, Harry floundered a moment then decided he was being ridiculous. It was only a game. It wasn't like he was betraying Sirius or anything, and today had reminded him very clearly of how badly he'd always wanted to be part of a "real" family. Seeing no harm in it, he grinned and said, "Sure," in what he hoped was a playful way. "Sorry, you just took me by surprise."

"Well, nothing about this morning has been exactly normal I guess," Steve said, sharing an ironic look with Janet. "Welcome to the funny farm," he joked, reaching a hand across the table.

Quodpot is a variant of Quidditch, played in North America. - Quidditch Through The Ages by Kennilworthy Whisp (J.K. Rowling)

This is a guess on my part since the zoo Harry, Piers and the Dursleys visit in HPSS is not specified. HPSS does state that Harry had never been to London before traveling there with Hagrid, so the London Zoo is eliminated. In light of that, I simply assumed proximity and moved on.

Chapter 27 - Be Careful What You Ask For...(Part 2 of 2)

"I can't believe this Ron!" Hermione fumed, stirring her tea with perhaps a bit more force than was strictly necessary. The pair was seated at a table in the Leaky Cauldron with a handful of other diners while Mr. Weasley spoke quietly with Tom, the bartender. "How has he kept up with his homework if he's been hiding out all summer?"

Torn between amusement and exasperation, Ron shook his head ruefully. "Hermione, I don't think you're thinking clearly," he said, scarcely able to believe the words were coming out of his mouth.

Hermione wasn't listening, though. She'd had all evening and most of the morning to get over the worst of her fear and worry, and had moved on to focusing on inconsistencies and details. "He's even finished with his Potions essay, or so he says," she continued, before narrowing her eyes suspiciously. "Do you think he's having us on?"

"I...I really don't know," Ron admitted at length, sighing, and raking his fingers through his hair. He felt as though he didn't know anything, really. It was beyond him why Harry hadn't written when his relatives hadn't shown up, and to top things off, his father had come home from the Ministry with his knickers in a twist about something.

"I wonder if your dad would mind a quick stop by Flourish & Blotts since we're so close," Hermione said consideringly. "There must be something there on tracking magic. I wish we could go to the library, but this will have to do. Harry may have managed until now because no one suspected, but Professor Dumbledore should have been able to find him in an instant--" Hermione broke off as Ron's demeanor finally registered on her, and stopped fussing long enough to ask, "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" he echoed incredulously. "Harry's supposed to be our best friend and he doesn't trust us!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed impatiently. "Ron, we've been over this a dozen times! Professor Dumbledore told Harry it would be safer if he didn't contact us. He made him promise."

"So?" he demanded pugnaciously. "Not like we haven't all broken a few rules."

Hermione responded with her patented Don't-Be-So-Thick look. "This is different, Ron. Professor Dumbledore knew exactly what he was doing. Harry doesn't break promises if he can help it, and if he thought he'd be endangering us..." she trailed off, shrugging helplessly.

"Oh, so he's our bloody mother now?" Ron exploded, flinging his hands in the air and making several heads turn their way.

Giggling nervously, Hermione made little "shushing" gestures, then lowered her voice. "No, you great git, but surely you've noticed how stubborn Harry can be when he gets a notion in his head! He's not deliberately slighting us! What happened to poor Cedric has him running scared!"

Brought up short, Ron considered that. Using the words "him", and "scared" in the same sentence where the "him" referred to "Harry Potter" seemed odd, but Hermione was probably right.

As usual.

Sighing, Ron started to concede the point, but was interrupted when Arthur came back. Tom was with him, carrying their order.

"Here we are," the innkeeper said jovially, passing out portions of fish and chips. "Enjoying your holiday, I hope?" he asked, addressing the teens as he worked.

"Yes, thank you," Ron and Hermione replied politely.

"Good, good," Tom smiled, turning toward the bar when a rather irritated voice called, "Tom!" Excusing himself from Arthur's table, Tom acknowledged the man's call and bustled away.

Ron spared a casual glance at the bar and snorted into his butterbeer. "Don't look now, but it's that prat photographer from the Daily Prophet," he said, when Hermione and his father looked at him

curiously. "The one who took pictures at Gilderoy Lockhart's book signing summer before Second Year."

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked, squinting towards the bar. "It's been a while."

"I'm sure," Ron confirmed. "He stepped on my foot pushing his way through to Lockhart. I thought he'd broken the blo--uh, the ruddy thing!" He glanced up at his father to see if he was going to be reprimanded, but Arthur wasn't listening. His attention was on the photographer and the wizard reporter sitting next to him.

Oh, smashing, Arthur thought sourly when he identified the journalist. It was Thaddeus Princeton, or "Old Prints Tons" as he was (un)affectionately known in the Ministry. Princeton's work was a little more factual and trustworthy than, say, Rita Skeeter's, but the man had the sensitivity of a brick, and a reputation for aggression and not knowing when to back off. He had reportedly been on assignment since before the summer holidays started, and not many in the Ministry had missed him.

"All right, Mr. Weasley?" Hermione asked curiously, wondering at his sudden change in attitude.

"What? Oh, yes. Fine, just fine," Arthur responded, smiling and pulling himself back to the present. "I was just thinking of a few encounters I've had with the press is all."

"So, did Tom say anything, Dad?" Ron prompted anxiously, pausing momentarily in the act of seasoning his fish to look up at his father. Hermione kept her attention on Mr. Weasley as well.

Arthur sighed as he looked at their expectant faces, then shook his head sadly. "Nothing we didn't know already," he admitted, dashing their hopes. Tom had confirmed that Harry had indeed spent the night of July first as a guest of the Leaky Cauldron, but hadn't volunteered any additional information. Arthur wasn't sure if the innkeeper was reluctant to speak, or simply didn't have anything else to share. Unfortunately, he couldn't ask too many questions without raising suspicion, and Dumbledore wanted this kept quiet as long as possible.

Great Merlin, what a mess! Arthur groaned inwardly. It was beyond him how things had gotten so muddled. Unfortunately there wasn't a lot he could do at the moment, so he refocused on Ron and Hermione.

"We'll get this sorted out, you'll see," he softly reassured the dejected looking teens. "I know you're concerned, but the less said in public the better." He waited for their glum nods, then continued in his normal tone of voice. "Well, the fish certainly looks good today! Tuck in before we have to use a warming charm," he invited, gesturing to their plates.

"Will we be going to Diagon Alley, Mr. Weasley?" Hermione asked a little hesitantly, after they had eaten a few minutes in silence.

Arthur frowned consideringly. He hadn't planned on making a trip to the Alley until after payday. Besides, all the children needed their Hogwarts supplies, not just Ron. It was on the tip of his tongue to say 'no,' but he reconsidered at the last moment when the conversation he'd had earlier with Amos Diggory came to mind:

There's a boy working in Flourish & Blotts who bears a striking resemblance to him. Black hair, slim build...

Rubbing his chin, Arthur considered further. Amos had sworn that the boy he saw wasn't Harry Potter, but the Weasley patriarch was dying to verify his claim...just in case. It wasn't that he didn't trust Amos, but Diggory didn't know Harry all that well, and here was the perfect excuse! He probably had enough for ice cream at Florean Fortescue's, and if he brought a big tub home, that would go a long way toward soothing any ruffled feathers.

"Hmm. Fancy a trip to Flourish & Blotts, do you?" he theorized, slanting a shrewd look at Hermione who nodded sheepishly. "Well, I suppose we could spare a little time," he granted, pulling out a pocket watch, and checking it. "Not too long, mind," he cautioned. "I'll have to Floo Molly and let her know we'll be a little later than originally planned," he mused. Hermione was supposed to spend the afternoon at the Burrow, then return home after supper.

"Can we stop in Quality Quidditch Supplies too, Dad?" Ron asked a little hesitantly. "The Keeper position's open...I'd like to take a look at the brooms," he said with a slight flush and a shrug.

"That can probably be arranged," Mr. Weasley allowed, smiling fondly at his youngest son. "A stop by Fortescue's might be in order as well if we get started quickly," he grinned, indicating their plates again.

Nodding eagerly, Ron and Hermione set to the business of finishing lunch with far more animation than before, barely noticing when the bells on the door leading into Muggle London rang, and Tom's voice greeted, "Janet, how lovely to see you, dear! Everything went well I presume?"

Casually curious, Arthur glanced over at the bar, observing absently as Tom came out from behind it, and spoke with a rather Muggle-looking family. The woman Tom had addressed as 'Janet' was balancing a toddler on her hip, and appeared to be introducing the brown-haired man at her side to the old bartender.

Good Lord but they spread their children out, he thought in amusement, studying the family. There were only three children, but they looked to have an age range that equaled or exceeded his entire brood. The oldest was clearly in his teens, the youngest was just a toddler.

"Look at that cute baby," Hermione grinned, following Mr. Weasley's gaze, and pointing discreetly. "She has hair just like Harry's."

"Don't be daft. Harry doesn't have curls," Ron scoffed around a mouthful of fish, insulted on his friend's behalf. "It just sticks up in the back, rather like that bloke's," he stated, indicating the dark-haired boy with a nod, then blinking in surprise when he realized what he'd just said.

"Do you think..?" Hermione asked, considering the family--especially the boy--more closely.

"I can't tell for certain," Ron admitted bemusedly. The family was standing in front of the bar with their backs to the main dining area. "Maybe we should go see," he suggested. Hermione nodded her agreement. As one they pushed their chairs back, preparing to rise, but Arthur stopped them.

"Wait," he cautioned in a firm but quiet voice. "I ran into Amos Diggory this morning, and he mentioned seeing a boy who looked a lot like Harry," he elaborated when they gave him confused looks. "That could be him. Besides, he seems to belong to that family," he went on, tilting his head to listen, "and they sound like they're from the States."

They didn't look happy, Arthur noted, but thankfully they decided to humor him for the moment. Nodding his thanks, Mr. Weasley returned to his observation of the newcomers, smiling nostalgically when the mother offered the littlest girl to her son so she could search through the bag she carried unencumbered. Nodding, the boy set his own bag beside the bar, and reached out for the rather solemn-faced baby, whispering something in her ear that made her laugh. Arthur watched this interplay thoughtfully. Was the son going to stay overnight at the Leaky Cauldron? No one else had luggage.

Well, even if he was it wasn't as uncommon as all that. Children often met up at the Leaky Cauldron then went shopping on Diagon Alley. Perhaps that was it, or maybe he was meeting another family for a weekend stay. An alarming number of Wizarding families were behaving as though the specter of Voldemort did not exist.

Heaving a mental sigh, Arthur pushed those thoughts aside, smiling as the toddler draped a companionable arm over her brother's shoulders and leaned her head against his. There was a larger age gap between the dark-haired children, but the two of them together were almost painfully reminiscent of Bill and Ginny not so terribly long ago. Time flies, he thought with faint astonishment. It just didn't seem possible that his baby girl was going to be fourteen this year--

"HARRY POTTER!"

"What?" Arthur gasped, as he was rudely ejected from his sentimental musings. He, Ron and Hermione jerked their heads in the direction of the shout just in time to see Thaddeus Princeton and his photographer rushing over to confront the family, heedless of Tom and the other Alley regulars who were trying to get their attention.

Arthur frowned a bit, and motioned again for Ron and Hermione to stay where they were. He'd expected the normal excited whispers of "Harry Potter? Where? Did you see him?" Admittedly there were a few, but the majority of the voices were addressing the two journalists, and were more along the lines of: "Wait, Thaddeus!" and "That's just Sparky!"

If this is the boy Amos saw, then old Thaddy is about to make a first class fool of himself, Arthur thought, wondering if it was unforgivable to find oneself relishing the notion. Of course, it wouldn't be the first time, nor was it likely to have any effect. The old adage "Look Before You Leap" was utterly lost on Princeton.

As was being evidenced now.

Tutting disapprovingly, Arthur watched as the pair reached the family, then froze in shock when Thaddeus reached out and grabbed the boy by the shoulder, spinning him around so the photographer could get a shot.

Everything happened in an instant, but to Arthur time seemed to stretch. When he looked back later it was like watching the events in slow motion.

The sudden movement combined with the blinding flash pulled the boy off balance. "Mama!" the toddler called fearfully, as he teetered helplessly, trying without success to regain his footing without the use of his arms. To complicate things further, the other sister rushed over, trying to help out, but all she was doing was increasing the possibility of him toppling over on her.

The mother looked up in surprise when she heard her name, realized what was happening, and quickly took action. "Steve! Tom!" she hollered, when it became obvious that the boy wasn't going to be able

to recover his balance. The brother seemed to sense this too, even in the midst of his floundering. Clutching the baby tightly to his chest, he screwed his eyes shut, ducked his head, and threw all his weight backwards, trying to change the angle of his fall so he wouldn't crush either of his sisters.

Spurred into action, Arthur fumbled for his wand with vague plans of casting a cushioning charm, but by the time he could get his hands on it, the scene was over. Luckily, Tom and the parents had been closer and in a better position to act. The mother grabbed her older daughter by the shoulders and yanked her out of harm's way while Tom and the father rushed forward and caught the boy before he and the baby could hit the floor.

Dead silence reigned for the space of several heartbeats, broken only when the mother and older daughter rushed over to where Tom and the father were standing to make sure everyone was all right.

Even Princeton had the good grace to look sheepish, Arthur noted, observing in mild surprise as the reporter actually paused a second or two, then marveling at the man's temerity when he doggedly pressed forward, throwing questions as he went when it became obvious no one was hurt.

"Mr. Potter, is there any truth to the rumor that you've spent your summer vacation in St. Mungo's Insane War--?" he began, moving toward the boy again, then breaking off and taking an unconscious step back when the boy looked up in shock and mother rounded on him with blood in her eye.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" she demanded furiously. "How dare you just grab him like that! Someone could have been hurt!"

Hiding a satisfied smirk, Arthur watched, amused, as she snatched up the bag she'd dropped in the excitement and stalked over, leaving the children in their father's care. Unless he was sadly mistaken, old Thaddy was about to be the recipient of an object lesson...

...and it couldn't have happened to a nicer, more deserving chap.

Princeton, Arthur noted, was looking a little nervous, and with good reason. He'd definitely twisted the tiger's tail this time! Besides being incensed, the mother appeared ready, willing, and able to bludgeon him to death with the bag in her hand. Watching, he almost felt sorry for the journalism team.

Almost.

"I'm terribly sorry, Madam," the reporter backpedaled, "I'm afraid it was a simple case of mistaken identity," he explained while the photographer nodded earnestly. "We thought he was Harry Potter," he added unnecessarily, as though that excused everything.

"Well he isn't," the mother informed them icily, obviously unimpressed with his explanation, "and even if he was, what difference does it make? Where do you get off treating people like that? Didn't they teach you any manners in journalism school?"

"I assure you I am well versed in all the proper techniques, madam, but this is a special case. Public appearances by the Boy Who Lived are very rare, and interviews are even more dear," the reporter tried again, still trying to excuse himself.

"Can't say I blame him if this is how he can expect to be treated," the father observed mildly, crossing his arms and moving to stand slightly in front of his children. He didn't say anything explicit, but there was a definite "back off" message in his body language.

Arthur cringed inwardly, recalling the Gilderoy Lockhart fiasco. They were right. Harry had been grabbed and photographed without so much as a by-your-leave, and no one had done a thing about it. He and Molly had stood there like ninnies, along with everyone else, acting like this was acceptable behavior and the press had carte blanche to do as they liked because of who Harry was.

"The public has a right to know," the photographer began stiffly, but Tom cut him off.

"I'll not stand by and allow you to harass my customers, gentlemen," he said sternly. "If you aren't capable of finding a newsworthy story without assaulting innocent bystanders, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"No need, Tom," Princeton said, finally relenting. "My apologies to you, and to you and your family, madam," he went on, including Janet in his apology. She nodded stiffly, looking a little irritated at being robbed of her target, but didn't say anything more as the two wizards returned to their seats and her husband came up behind her.

"Ease up, champ," he soothed, gently rubbing her shoulders. "Everyone's okay, see?" he said, turning her in the children's direction. "There's no need to make a Federal case out of it. Besides, it would be a shame if we were deported my first day in country," he teased, finally coaxing a half-smile.

"Whoa," Ron breathed when it was obvious the confrontation was over. "That lady's almost as scary as Mum is."

"She is, isn't she?" Arthur chortled, "I expect they'd get along famously," he grinned, watching as the parents went back over to where their children were waiting. The brother was still holding the toddler in the crook of one arm, but now he had his other arm around his other sister's shoulders. She, in turn, was hugging him around the waist.

"All right, sweets?" the mother asked, giving the boy a quick once-over, and smiling when he said something in reply that Arthur could not hear. "Okay, if you're sure, I guess we'll be going," she decided, reclaiming the baby and shouldering her bag while the father took the older girl's hand.

"What? Oh, drat! I thought they were staying for lunch!" Arthur said, half-rising then dropping back into his seat as Tom moved to stand beside the boy, and the two of them raised their hands in farewell.

"See you later," Janet called as the rest of the family said their goodbyes and started for the door, "and holler if you need anything," she added, addressing this last part to the boy.

Curious, Arthur, Ron, and Hermione all leaned a little closer, hoping that the boy would speak, but he merely smiled and flashed her the "thumbs-up" sign, then turned his attention to Tom when the old wizard laid a hand on his shoulder and spoke quietly in his ear. Nodding, he retrieved his bag and hurried out the door leading to Diagon Alley while the rest of the family disappeared into Muggle London.

"I'll have to see Tom about an introduction," Arthur speculated. "It should be fairly simple. From the sound of things they stop in often," he mused, then addressed Ron and Hermione directly. "Finish up and we'll be off. I'll wager we'll catch up to that boy on Diagon Alley." Harry paced around his room, watching the door with trepidation. As soon as the Wrights were headed out, Tom had caught him by the shoulder and given him some terse instructions. He was to go out the public Diagon Alley exit, nip back in through the kitchen delivery door, then go up to his room and stay there until called. Tom wanted to discuss something with him.

Shuddering slightly, Harry paused, not liking the implications at all. The slight negative vibe he'd felt at the Wrights this morning had been ambiguous and open to interpretation.

The emotions Tom was giving off were not.

Raking a hand through his hair in frustration, Harry finally settled on the bed, feeling miserable and out of sorts. He didn't need his special sense to determine that the old innkeeper was highly agitated at the moment. Wincing a bit, Harry rubbed a hand across his stomach. It had settled somewhat overnight, and hadn't bothered him at breakfast, but now it was tied in painful knots again.

A glance at the clock told him a mere five minutes had passed since he'd trudged up the stairs and closed the door behind him. It was amazing, really. Just last Sunday he had been perfectly content to spend the afternoon in this room, reading, doing homework, and catching up on correspondence. Now that it wasn't his idea to be here he felt edgy, stifled and trapped.

Making a frustrated little noise, Harry grabbed his bag and dumped it out on the bed. For the next few minutes he busied himself by throwing the clothes he'd worn yesterday in the laundry pile, shelving the two texts he'd brought along (but hadn't looked at), and returning his toiletries and miscellaneous items like his wand and the little flute Hagrid had carved for him to their rightful places. Eventually, Silas' mirror was the only item left to be dealt with.

Well, so much for being able to return this immediately... Harry thought glumly, picking up the glass and frowning considerably. I suppose I should call Cassie and let her know, he thought, working the mirror out of its leather sleeve. "Cassandra?"

There was a slight pause, then Cass appeared. "Well, well. Survived I see," she observed, smiling.

"It wasn't too bad," he allowed with an answering grin. "Kitty rescued me from having to play dolls with Becky. I think I may owe her a Wizard Debt."

Cassie's silvery laughter issued over their connection for a few seconds, then she smirked at him again. "So are you back at the Leaky Cauldron, then?"

"Yes, but I can't bring the mirror to you just now. Tom has something to discuss with me, and wants me to stay at the Cauldron for a while until he gets caught up."

"Uh-oh, sounds ominous. What did you do?" she teased, widening her eyes at him.

"I'm not sure, he didn't say exactly. A reporter from the Daily Prophet thought he'd spotted Harry Potter and made a scene, though. He realized he'd made a mistake when he saw my face, but..." Harry broke off and shrugged. "Maybe Tom just wants to make sure everything's sorted out," he guessed.

Cassie rolled her eyes, clearly recalling the afternoon he'd spent at Lancaster's. "Yes, that's the way it usually goes, isn't it?" she

chuckled. "Poor you. Must get annoying--all that lovely enthusiasm, followed by all those looks of crushed disappointment."

"I manage," he said with another shrug. "So, should I leave the mirror in the kitchen with Tom, or would you rather I send it by owl?"

"There's no great rush. Just hold on to it for now. Silas and I are going out this afternoon, anyway. I have no idea how long we'll be, so we'll fetch it this evening, or tomorrow morning if we're running late."

"Okay. See you then," Harry agreed, nodding as she waved and faded from sight. Once she was gone, he returned the mirror to its sleeve, then put it on the dresser and wondered what to do. He didn't especially want to work on assignments at the moment, and letters were completely out of the question as well. He needed some task to keep himself occupied that didn't require a lot of thought.

With that in mind Harry scanned the perimeter of the room, and spotted the box from Mrs. Figg's house in the process. That'll do, he decided, shoving it to the side of the bed, then laying carefully on his still complaining stomach so he could peer over the side of the mattress and into the container's interior.

The box still held a hopeless tangle of papers, but Harry had made good progress in sorting through the mess. Recently he'd been able to feel tantalizing touches of something else when he stuck his arm in far enough--like there was something other than paper in there. The trick was to slide his arm carefully between the side and the contents without triggering the automatic enlarging charms. The dark-haired boy raised an inquiring eyebrow, and wondered if that meant he was getting closer to the bottom.

Deciding to be adventurous, Harry gripped the side of the box tightly with his left hand to keep from sliding off the bed, and sunk his right arm in past the shoulder. He nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise when his fingers brushed something soft and furry. Reflexively, he jerked his arm out, then stopped and frowned consideringly. Surely that wasn't real.

Trying to remember the exact location, he carefully reached in again, feeling around hopefully. His fingers brushed a few objects deep in the box, but they were still just beyond his reach. He found the furry thing again, and managed to catch a few strands of "hair" between his index and middle fingers, but they wouldn't support the object's weight, and all he managed to do was pull a little tuft of fuzz free when he tried to lift it out.

Harry studied the golden brown strands curiously, then shrugged and reached in again, this time retrieving a large handful of papers from somewhere in the middle. He might be getting closer to the mysterious items, but there was still a stack of paper longer than his arm on top of them. Clearly, he was going to have to do some more excavation before he got there.

Flipping through the stack in his hand, he found nothing of real import--old school assignments and unsigned permission slips mostly. Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had hardly ever allowed him to go on school outings.

On the other hand, he'd unearthed quite a few letters and grade/progress reports from his Muggle school to his aunt and uncle. Nothing much had happened as a result, but the correspondence had been telling. Several teachers, especially early on, had nominated him for special programs and activities. Others noticed how he held back in class and pointed this out as a concern. The biggest shock had been a fair number of notes regarding Dudley's behavior towards him.

All pleas on his behalf had obviously fallen on deaf ears, but Harry was struck by how many he'd run across. In addition, he could almost track subtle changes in Dudley's behavior by the dates on the correspondence. The bullying hadn't stopped--Dudley had just gotten sneakier about it--but someone had noticed, which was more than he'd thought at the time.

The dreaded knock at the door came when Harry was sorting through his third handful of paper. He managed not to cry out in surprise, but started violently nonetheless. Hmm. So much for calming down, the

Gryffindor thought wryly, dropping the stack of papers back into the box, then walking over to answer the door.

As expected, it was Tom. He had come up more quickly than Harry had expected, but on balance, he supposed it really wasn't all that surprising. Sunday was typically a slow day at the Cauldron, so once the small crowd of lunch customers cleared out, there wouldn't be anything to delay him.

Hesitantly, Harry ushered Tom in, then stood nervously to one side, wondering what would happen next.

"I had a very interesting conversation with Mr. Arthur Weasley earlier," Tom said without preamble, sitting down on the desk chair, and motioning for Harry to have a seat on the bed.

"Mr. Weasley?" Harry croaked as his heart sank to somewhere near the vicinity of his kneecaps, then snapped back in place and began to pound.

"Yes. I was quite surprised when he asked me if I'd seen Harry Potter this summer," Tom said, in a rather no-nonsense tone. "I found myself in a rather awkward position, as you can imagine," he went on, making Harry glad they were both seated. "I finally verified that you had spent the night of July first as a guest of the Leaky Cauldron because he already seemed to know that much. Beyond that I had no idea how much was safe to say. Exactly what is going on, Harry?"

"What--what do you mean?"

"Well, you claim to have written your headmaster and your friends several days ago," Tom pointed out.

"And I did!" Harry asserted defensively.

"Yes," Tom allowed, holding up a hand to silence Harry when he would have continued. "You showed me the addressed envelopes before you sent Hedwig out, and I received a letter from Dumbledore myself, remember?"

Harry nodded, watching as Tom crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. Fidgeting nervously, he waited for the other wizard to continue.

"I must admit I find myself wondering what you did or didn't say in your correspondence," Tom said at length. "Are you quite certain you told them everything?"

Harry's stomach gave another sickly lurch. Tom wasn't accusing him of lying--yet--but it was obvious that the old wizard knew something was afoot, and was determined to have some answers. "I told them the important things," he hedged, willing the other wizard to understand. "I told everyone about getting a job, and I've reported everything I've seen through my scar to Professor Dumbledore. I even told him that my aunt and uncle moved!"

Tom mulled this over for a minute, then shook his head. "Sorry, Harry, but that doesn't tally. If you've been so forthcoming, then why was Arthur Weasley in here today half out of his mind with worry?" he asked, pinning the boy with a censuring stare. "He tried not to let on, but I could tell he was upset about something. Too many years in the business."

"Mr. Weasley was here? " Harry gasped, feeling the rest of the color drain from his face.

"Yes, just now. He had young Ronald and your little Muggleborn friend--Hermione--with him as well," Tom said, stopping and frowning in concern. "All right there, Harry? You look a little green."

Truthfully, Harry felt about as far from "all right" as a person could be at the moment, but he responded to the question with an automatic nod and an "I'm fine" that sounded unconvincing even to his own ears. Tom looked skeptical, but didn't push the issue.

"I sent you upstairs because I wasn't sure what was going on, and I presumed they would have the best chance of seeing through your disguise," he explained instead, continuing with his previous thought. "So I say again, what is going on? Why are people looking for you?"

Flustered, Harry shook his head in growing agitation. "I don't know! I told them I was all right, I don't know why they won't believe me!"

"Harry, does Professor Dumbledore know you're here?" Tom asked quietly.

Desperate to escape the quiet disappointment in the old man's face, Harry squeezed his eyes shut then bowed his head and crossed his arms defensively over his stomach. "What does it matter? I'm all right, and I'm out of their way. Safely tucked away for the summer," he responded tightly, saying the last in a sarcastic little singsong.

"For your information, young man, it matters a great deal," Tom retorted, showing a flash of true annoyance.

"I stayed on Diagon Alley before!" Harry argued stubbornly, trying to make the old man see. "Summer before my third year!"

"That was different, Harry, the whole Alley was looking out for you," Tom retorted before visibly reining himself in. "All right," he said, obviously trying a different approach. "Who does know you're here?"

Harry looked up warily. "Besides you?"

"Yes."

"Hedwig."

Tom frowned unappreciatively. "That isn't funny."

"I wasn't trying to be funny. I haven't told anyone!" Harry said earnestly before plunging into a garbled explanation. "I was planning to write someone when I first got here, but then you gave me the job and let me stay in the room, and it was okay. They're all busy, and Dumbledore was carrying on about the danger, and I didn't want to bother anyone, and honestly, I didn't want anyone to know, and I really didn't know what else to do..." Harry trailed off when he realized he was babbling, then swallowed and looked at Tom miserably.

"Did it ever occur to you that Dumbledore and the others might be worried?" Tom asked, clearly exasperated.

Worried? Harry thought a moment, then slowly shook his head. Professor Dumbledore and the others were concerned about his safety from magical attack, hence the blood protection on Privet Drive, and his aunt and uncle looked after him just enough to stay on the straight side of the law. Well, until this summer, anyway. Beyond that, he'd always been left to fend for himself.

"No," he admitted, with an attitude of honest confusion, watching as the annoyance in Tom's expression changed to shocked bewilderment.

"Your family must be concerned. Have you at least written to them?" Tom asked, spreading his hands in an oddly pleading gesture.

"I don't have any family. They abandoned me, remember?" Harry grumbled, annoyed that Tom couldn't seem to grasp this fact.

"But have you tried to contact them?" the innkeeper persisted. "There must have been some misunderstanding."

That was it. Harry's patience was at an end. He was tired of trying to explain himself, and even more tired of others assuming they knew what he was about and what he should do. The fact that he felt like seven kinds of hell because of his queasily jumping stomach wasn't helping things either.

"There was no point in contacting them, and there wasn't any misunderstanding, Tom!" he flared, his eyes snapping angrily. "What you and Dumbledore and the whole bloody Wizarding World refuse to see is my muggle relatives hate me! It isn't in my head, it's not going to get better, and we aren't 'really fond of each other deep down!' They packed up and moved to bloody Australia and made sure they were gone before I returned from Hogwarts! Does that sound like a mistake to you?"

Tom said nothing for several seconds, making Harry wonder if he'd pushed too far. Tensing a bit, he studied the older man warily. Uncle

Vernon would have probably given him the back of his hand before Harry finished his first sentence.

Or tried to.

Among other things, life with the Dursleys had taught Harry all about the fine art of dodging.

Tom didn't seem inclined to strike, though. In fact he looked almost comically gobsmacked. "Australia?" he finally echoed, after swallowing and blinking a few times.

"Yes," Harry confirmed, calming fractionally in the face of the other wizard's shock. "Frankly, I reckoned they'd move closer to Majorca if they went anywhere besides Britain, but..." he said, trailing off with a shrug.

Tom nodded absently, looking like he still trying to process what he'd been told. "When did you find this out?" he finally managed.

"Just last night. Professor Dumbledore told me before I left for Janet's."

"But why?" Tom demanded angrily. "Why would they leave you?"

"I'm not sure," Harry admitted. "They've never been gracious about me staying with them, but they always allowed it before. Something changed, I think. Professor Dumbledore sent them a letter explaining about the Third Task and...everything," he recalled, moving to the dresser and sifting through a stack of papers, finally producing an envelope addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Dursley. "Maybe they panicked when they read about Volde--err, You-Know-Who coming back," he theorized, flipping the letter over absently while he thought.

When he glanced at Tom again, it was apparent that his friend was at a loss. Sighing, Tom rubbed his temples, looking like he had a headache coming on. Harry could sympathize. Today had been a little too close--several times already. Guiltily he realized he had unwittingly put the old wizard on the horns of a very awkward dilemma.

Unfortunately, in light of what Tom had admitted to Mr. Weasley, the old bartender was now the last person who'd "seen" Harry Potter. If others were looking there would be other questions. "Sparky" would probably be scrutinized rather carefully as well since he conveniently appeared so soon after "Harry" vanished. Admittedly, Tom had shown an uncommon willingness to help him since the beginning of summer, but Harry wasn't stupid enough to believe Tom would lie to protect him, or openly defy Albus Dumbledore.

On top of that, Tom had the safety of the Leaky Cauldron and its patrons to consider, Harry mused with a guilty little squirm. He'd gotten so caught up in his wonderful new freedom and anonymity, he'd forgotten or chosen to ignore the possible consequences of being out in the open like this. Befriending the Wrights probably wasn't too bright either. What had he been thinking? They'd be helpless if attacked!

What a mess, Harry groaned inwardly, massaging his forehead with his fingertips. He just couldn't seem to win this summer. He'd tried to do the right thing, tried to follow instructions and stay out of the way, but no matter how hard he tried, everything turned out wrong! Probably the only reason no one had tracked him down yet was he was thought to be safely behind his wards and protective magic.

"I think we need to invite Professor Dumbledore to come here so we can sort this out face to face," Tom finally suggested, turning to face Harry with a very serious expression.

"No!" Harry blurted before he could stop himself. "Please, don't. I'll--I'll just go!" he offered desperately.

Tom blinked like he'd been slapped. "What are you on about? Don't be daft," he chided gently, walking over to Harry and laying a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You're welcome here, lad, now and always. Why won't you believe me? What are you so afraid of?"

"He'll send me back! I don't want to go back, I want to stay here!" Harry said, shaking his head unhappily and coming closer than he ever had to admitting something was amiss.

"I want you to stay as well!" Tom coaxed reassuringly, giving the boy's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Dumbledore isn't a heartless monster, Harry. Do be reasonable!"

"He knows already," Harry replied softly, meeting Tom's gaze in the mirror. "He found out the Dursleys went to Australia. He said he was going to bring me to Hogwarts until everything could be sorted."

"No, I mean once he knows everything about your aunt and uncle," Tom clarified, giving the boy a pointed look. "I'll admit I have no idea how such a daft mistake could have been made, but once he knows about--"

"What?" Harry asked tensely, glancing around to see what had caught Tom's attention. Following the other wizard's shocked gaze, he cringed in embarrassment. His search for the letter Professor Dumbledore had sent the Dursleys had unearthed another one, leaving it out in full view.

His very first Hogwarts letter.

"Mr. H. Potter, Cupboard Under the Stairs?" Tom read, looking incredulously at Harry. "Why was this addressed to a cupboard?"

Harry shrugged, employing the defense he'd used all summer when he didn't wish to discuss something.

Tom frowned but, again, didn't push, making Harry feel a warm rush of gratitude. "What happened to it?" he asked instead, indicating the charred edges. Harry almost shrugged again, then reconsidered, surprising himself almost as much as Tom.

"My uncle burned it," he said tiredly, looking down again. "He didn't want me to attend Hogwarts, I reckon. I thought it was gone until I opened that box," he declared, pointing to the container by the bed with an attitude of frank confusion. "It's the weirdest thing, Tom! Loads of things that I know my aunt and uncle binned somehow ended up in that box looking like they'd never been touched!"

"What?" Tom sputtered incredulously. "But... I... He... How..."

"I don't know," Harry replied absently, not put off in the least by Tom's incoherency, and somehow understanding what he was trying to ask. "The box seemed to be waiting for me at Mrs. Figg's house. As for the letter, well, I reckon Professor Dumbledore has a reason. At least that's what I keep telling myself," he admitted, giving the other wizard an ironic half-smile.

Tom nodded, ostensibly accepting the explanation, but Harry thought he looked rather like a man who was being drawn in two different directions at once.

"I...I need to think about this, Harry," Tom finally admitted with a heavy sigh, "but I promise I won't contact Professor Dumbledore without telling you first."

Harry nodded reluctantly. It wasn't the vow of secrecy he'd been hoping for, but he trusted Tom to keep his word. "Thank you," he said gratefully. "I don't know if you can understand or not, but I needed to be away from them this summer, what with Cedric and all. I was upset when I found out they'd gone, but now I really think it was for the best. Working, getting out, it's been good for me." Harry stopped and flushed slightly. "Does that make any sense?"

"Yes, actually, it makes a great deal of sense," Tom said in a way that made Harry wonder what he knew or suspected. They stood in silence for several awkward seconds, then Tom spoke again.

"So, how did everything go last night?" he asked, making Harry blink at the sudden change of topic.

"Okay," Harry replied, once he'd gathered himself and recognized that the elegant advance and retreat methods Tom favored were in action. The toothless innkeeper, Harry had found, had an exquisite sense of timing. He knew exactly how far to push, and when it was time to back off. Because of this, Harry had probably admitted more to Tom than any other adult, and felt the least pressured in doing so.

This was not one of Tom's more subtle segues, but Harry was grateful for the break nonetheless. The return to more mundane subject matter was Tom's way of signaling that the inquisition was over.

For now.

"Kitty and Becky are magical," Harry grinned, picking up the thread of conversation.

"Ah, well, we suspected that," Tom said, looking pleased. "Did you tell Janet and Steve?" he asked, after pausing a beat.

"Erm, no. Kitty seemed reluctant to, and besides, I didn't know what the rules were for telling Muggles about the Wizarding World. I've been meaning to ask you for ages, I just kept putting it off."

"Well, don't think you've completely fooled Janet. She's been working up to it for a few days now, but she finally asked if she could come by later for a little chat."

"What does Janet want to talk about?" Harry asked, frowning uneasily.

"She didn't say precisely. I reckon she's noticed something that's made her curious. As I said, not much gets by that one," Tom speculated. "And you probably ought to know, Arthur Weasley requested an introduction to the Wrights, and their three children before he left."

"Three?" Harry squeaked. "You mean he thinks I'm..." he trailed off, unable to finish.

Tom laughed. "Yes, along with everyone else who was in the pub, I'd wager. It's probably a good thing Janet is coming by. We should do her the courtesy of explaining the misconception before she's approached and complimented on her son, wouldn't you agree?"

Harry closed his eyes with a little moan and hid behind his hands. Could this get any worse? No! Wait! Forget I asked!

"Stiff upper lip, Harry. We'll sort it out," Tom said bracingly, doing his best not to laugh. "Now, I do believe I'm ready for a spot of lunch. Would you care to join me?"

"No, thanks. We slept in and had a late breakfast," Harry declined, choosing not to mention that he didn't think he could swallow a bite at the moment anyway. The way his stomach currently felt, anything he tried to put in it would likely be rejected in short order. "I'll get a snack later, or just wait until dinner."

"Suit yourself lad. The dining room seems quiet now, and I'm available if you want to come down. I also believe your friends are still on Diagon Alley if you'd care to catch up with them," Tom hinted, exiting, and leaving Harry to his troubled thoughts.

Chapter 28 - Coming Around
Sunday, July 23, 1995

"Albus? May I have a word?"

Dumbledore looked up and managed a tired smile for the wizard in his fireplace grate. "Of course Arthur, let me open the Floo for you."

"Thank you," Arthur said a few second later from his place on the hearth. "I went to Diagon Alley today and spoke to Tom and some of the other shopkeepers," he started, before noticing Sirius, Remus, Minerva and Filius and pulling himself up short. "Is this a bad time?" he asked uncertainly, noticing the room's other occupants appeared particularly distressed. "If so, I'll be brief, or call again later."

Dumbledore shook his head and transfigured another chair in front of his desk. "Your timing couldn't be better. We have finished, I think. Now, this is about young Harry, I presume?"

Weasley nodded, taking a seat beside Sirius while the Headmaster settled himself behind his desk. "Yes. I spoke to Tom at the Leaky Cauldron first. He verified that Harry spent the night of July first at the Leaky Cauldron, but didn't offer any additional information. I couldn't tell if he knew anything else, and didn't dare ask outright. I was having enough trouble keeping Ron and Hermione quiet. They wanted to discuss Harry and figure out where he had gone and what he was up to."

"Well you know, they're probably in the best position to spot him, even if he's wearing a disguise," Remus pointed out. "I daresay they know his habits and mannerisms better than he does--Ron, especially, because they share a dorm."

"That is true," Albus conceded. "Perhaps it is time to solicit their assistance."

"Hermione is visiting for the afternoon," Arthur said, glancing towards the fireplace. "Would you like me to call them?" he ventured, not liking the grim look his companions shared.

At length, Dumbledore sighed heavily. "Perhaps that would be best," he admitted, raising his white eyebrows inquiringly at Harry's godfather. "Do you have any objections, Sirius?"

Black and Lupin, Arthur noted, looked sharply conflicted--rather like men trying to determine the lesser of two evils. Finally Sirius spoke. "All right, but let's not get into that if we can avoid it," he said, nodding at a large stone container by the Headmaster's desk.

"Agreed," Albus said, a vast sadness in his mysterious blue eyes. "We shall call them directly, but for now please continue, Arthur."

Nodding, the red-haired wizard got back to business and summed up the high points. He began by recapping the salient parts of his conversation with Amos Diggory in case Dumbledore hadn't mentioned it to the others present, then told about the family he'd spotted and the minor altercation in the Leaky Cauldron.

"They split up and left before we could get close enough to talk to them, or even get a good look at them," he reported. "The boy headed for Diagon Alley, and the parents and the two younger children went back into Muggle London. You know, the whole family appeared to be Muggle, come to think of it," he muttered almost to himself before getting back on track. "Anyway, I'm almost certain that's the boy Amos spotted. I asked Tom for an introduction since he seemed to know the family. He said he'd arrange one, then the children and I headed down Diagon Alley ourselves. Hermione wanted to go to Flourish & Blotts, and frankly, I was hoping to catch up to that boy."

"So did you?" Sirius asked, interested in spite of himself.

Arthur shook his head, sighing heavily as he did so. "No, but I did learn quite a lot about him."

"Indeed?" Dumbledore prompted, steepling his fingertips together.

"Yes. His name is Jim Patterson, but everyone calls him 'Sparky.' He's been working at the Leaky Cauldron since the beginning of the holiday doing general cleaning, meal preparation, that sort of thing.

He started out working nights, then began waiting tables and taking odd jobs in some of the shops about mid-month. I was very excited because that agrees with the letters Harry has written to Ron." Arthur paused a moment, then shook his head remembering. "The Alley wasn't hideously busy, so I was able to speak with several shopkeepers. They couldn't say enough about him: how bright he is, how responsible he is, how hard-working he is...they all agreed on those points."

"I think I sense a 'but' coming," Remus commented dryly, exchanging a look with Sirius.

"Maybe," Arthur admitted, smiling wryly. "I'm truly not sure. Things got a little fuzzy when I steered the conversations towards more personal matters. Some thought he was earning room and board at the Leaky Cauldron, others thought he went home every night. Some thought he belonged to that family I mentioned, others were under the impression that he had merely befriended the family. They laughed about the way he fooled newcomers, and how they'd had to start heading people off who thought they'd spotted Harry Potter."

"So they don't think he's Harry?" Sirius asked, seeing where this was headed.

"No."

"Did they give a reason?" Dumbledore wondered.

"Everyone insists the boy has brown eyes and no one's ever noticed a scar," Arthur shrugged. "I thought he might have managed a glamour charm somehow, but one of the clerks at Flourish & Blotts said she got suspicious early on and hit him with Finite Incantatem. She felt like a right idiot when his appearance didn't change, and begged his forgiveness, of course. By all accounts, he was shocked for a minute then laughed it off, and that effectively squashed most of the Potter speculation."

"What did Ron and Hermione think?" Sirius wondered, leaning slightly forward in his chair.

"They weren't sure--neither was I for that matter. Something about the way he carries himself reminded us all of Harry, and his hair sticks up in the back like Harry's does, but if it is Harry, he's hit a massive growth spurt. As Ron so elegantly put it, 'he's taller now and not as scrawny.' He also looks like he's been spending a fair amount of time outdoors. We all agreed that we'd need to get closer and actually speak to the boy before we could tell for certain, but we didn't get the opportunity. We went from one end of Diagon Alley to the other, and stayed much longer than I intended, but he simply wasn't to be found."

"Perhaps that is something you could check for us, Minerva," Dumbledore suggested. "I believe your Animagus form would allow you to observe Mr. Patterson undetected. I know you are capable as well Sirius," he continued, when Black opened his mouth to protest, "but if this boy is young Harry, he will know you in an instant. Minerva's form is smaller and easier to conceal. She has a great deal of experience in these matters as well. If he is hiding from us as well as Voldemort as we suspect, you could panic him into running, revealing himself or something equally unwise."

Unable to deny it, Sirius subsided, but looked most unhappy about the entire situation. "I hope you realize you're sending a cat to do a dog's job," he grumbled, crossing his arms on his chest and drawing a pointed look from his former Head of House.

"Perhaps now would be a good time to talk to Ron and Hermione," Remus suggested, tactfully changing the subject before Sirius could dig himself in any deeper.

"Of course. Let me call the Burrow and see if they're about," Arthur offered, rising and walking to the fireplace.

Tuesday, July 25, 1995

Almost...almost...oh come on now!

Kneeling on the floor beside it, Harry clung to the box from Mrs. Figg's house with one hand and stretched his other arm in as far as he dared, reaching...

stretching...

searching...

and...

finding!

"Hah!" he crowed in victory, as his hand finally closed on one of the objects that had been teasing him. It was the furry one.

With a determined little frown, the boy worked on pulling the thing through all the paper still on top of it. It was slow going, rather like dragging something up through a vat of warm taffy, but Harry was too close to give up now. He'd been thinking about this particular object, and had already decided it was probably one of his old baby things--a stuffed toy, most likely. What he didn't know, of course, was what shape it was. Did magical children own things as common as stuffed bears?

Planting his feet on the floor for more leverage, he gave an almighty heave and finally hauled the thing out of the box, standing as he did so. Grinning in anticipation, Harry glanced down at his prize, then blinked in shock when he recognized the ginger cat he had by the scruff of the neck.

"Crookshanks?" he yelped, dropping the bandy-legged beast onto the floor. "Wha-what are you doing here?" Crookshanks shook himself and sneezed twice before blinking lazily up at him.

"Why looking after you of course," the cat replied, calmly licking a paw.

"You can talk?" Harry gulped after making an inarticulate noise of surprise.

"Of course," Hermione's bushy-tailed feline replied, pausing long enough to give the boy an amused look. "You should hear what Hedwig says when you're not about."

Harry decided he didn't want to think about that, then grimaced as something else occurred to him. "Is Hermione with you?" he asked timidly.

"What do you think," Crookshanks said smugly, somehow managing a very evil smile before enlarging and transforming into a fuzzy Chudley Cannons blanket.

A Chudley Cannons blanket with a suspicious-looking lump underneath.

Before Harry could do much more than suck in a startled breath, Ron and Hermione threw off the blanket and stood up. Initially his friends looked as shocked as he did, but they recovered quickly, whipping out their wands and glaring angrily. Harry instinctively backed up a step, stumbling over the box and sitting down hard on the floor.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Hermione cried, immobilizing Harry before he could regain his feet.

No! Wait! Let me explain! Harry thought, desperately trying to break free of the Full Body Bind his friend had cast. Unfortunately, it wasn't as prone to being thrown off as the Imperious Curse.

Ron was next. "Wingardium Leviosa!" he intoned, lifting Harry from the floor, and floating him over to where the two of them were standing.

Harry was grateful that Ron had at least positioned him upright, until he saw the look on Hermione's face.

Bugger.

That was the scowl she normally wore right before trying to knock some poor bloke's head off his shoulders.

Wait, please! Let me explain! Harry begged, silently willing them to understand since his frozen mouth and vocal cords still refused to work.

"Of all the stupid, thoughtless, juvenile behavior!" Hermione raged, drawing her hand back while Ron crossed his arms on his chest and continued to glare unforgivingly. Unable to close his eyes or turn away, Harry watched helplessly as her hand flashed out, connecting with a sharp crack that sent him tumbling arse over elbow.

Her touch seemed to have broken the spells cast on him, Harry noted distractedly as he flailed around trying to right himself. Somewhere along the line he'd acquired an armful of something, and clutched at it frantically as he continued his dizzying free fall. It seemed to go on forever before he came to a halt, colliding solidly with something behind him.

"Relax, buddy," a voice said reassuringly in his ear, as two sets of arms reached out and steadied him. "We have you. You're not going to fall."

Steve! Tom!

Harry closed his eyes in relief and sagged gratefully into their comforting strength. He smiled a little when he felt gentle fingers-- Janet's?-- brush his cheek, only to stiffen in surprise a second later when the fingers grew cold, and his scar burned fiercely in response to the contact. Without warning, the bundle he held was snatched from his hands, and the arms encircling him tightened uncomfortably, transforming into rough ropes.

What's happening? No, oh no! the boy thought wildly, when the bodies he was leaning against grew as hard and cold as stone, and a breeze that hadn't been there before ruffled his hair. Reluctantly he forced his eyes open, shuddering in distaste when he recognized Peter Pettigrew and the graveyard where Voldemort had been reborn. Desperately casting around for assistance or a means of escape, Harry gasped in horror when he saw Steve, Janet and Kitty laying crumpled on the ground beside him, and somehow perceived that the tombstone he was tied to marked the resting place of Tom, the Leaky Cauldron Innkeeper, not Tom Riddle.

Light, quick tugs and pats distracted Harry's attention, as Wormtail busily checked the cords that held him fast. All the while the rat

Animagus clutched a bundle of black cloth to his chest, forcing himself to work one handed.

One handed...eugh!

Shivering again, Harry swallowed with difficulty. His heart began to pound in forewarned anticipation when the little man produced his knife from one of his robe pockets, and inspected the edge of the blade. He had no desire whatsoever to see or "participate" in the rebirth ceremony again, so he squeezed his eyes shut, trying desperately to block it all out.

Of course being tied up and all, there was very little he could do about his hearing. An evil chuckle on Harry's right was the only warning he had before the cold hand was back, cupping his chin almost lovingly. The teen gasped, arching against the ropes as the contact set off fresh waves of misery from his scar.

"What's wrong, boy?" Voldemort purred silkily, enjoying the Gryffindor's anguish for a few more seconds before relenting and taking his hand away. "Do you not wish to see the festivities?"

Panting harshly, Harry hung limply against the ropes for a minute or two before he could summon the strength to lift his head and see what the dark wizard was on about. The huge stone cauldron was back, filled with some soupy liquid that hissed and bubbled sluggishly. "It is almost ready, Master," Wormtail commented, while Harry glanced uneasily from the cauldron to the black cloth in the shorter wizard's hands.

That couldn't be right.

Voldemort was standing right there, already re-formed. The potion was different, too.

So what was in the blanket?

Or who... Harry blinked suddenly, ripping his gaze from the cauldron, and jerking his head in the direction of the Wright family, before letting it rest on the black cloth again. No. Oh, please no... he thought,

cringing involuntarily as Pettigrew unwrapped the black cloth and he found himself staring into the terrified eyes of Rebecca Wright. "Parky!" she cried, reaching out to him as Harry struggled fruitlessly against his bonds. "Parkeeeeeeeee....."
"NO! STOP!"

Harry sat bolt upright in bed, breathing hard and bathed in sweat. Reflexively he felt his scar, sighing in relief when there was nary a prickle. "Nightmare," he muttered, trying to reassure himself. "Just a nightmare. Nothing more."

Still shaking a little in reaction, Harry closed his eyes and took a couple of steadying breaths. It had been the same story since his talk with Tom. The nightmares, which had subsided somewhat over the past couple of weeks, were back with a vengeance. Even better, instead of merely replaying events as they'd occurred--which was quite bad enough, thanks--his warped subconscious was having a grand time weaving fact and fantasy together into a horrifying new collection of scenarios. Generally he woke from these dreams with shocking suddenness, and had to spend a few moments waiting for his galloping pulse to normalize and his queasy stomach to settle before getting up.

Today, unfortunately, was no exception. Harry blotted his face with the hem of his T-shirt, then squinted blearily at the clock. There was still had a little time before he had to get up, so he eased back onto his pillows with a soft groan and concentrated on lying as still as possible. He supposed he should be grateful that this hadn't been a vision instead of just a nightmare. The way he was currently feeling, if he'd experienced true scar pain instead of just a memory of it, he'd probably be running for the loo instead of merely nauseated.

The bed shifted slightly as Patches jumped up with a soft plop. Harry gave the cat a half smile in response to her interrogative mew, and watched warily as she came toward him, wading through his disheveled covers. More often than not when he was laying on his back like this, she'd walk up his leg and plop down on his belly. Unsure about the wisdom of that activity he steeled himself, waiting for the sensation of little cat feet digging into his abdomen, but Patches surprised him. She rubbed her head against his cheek, then

flumped down in the space between his arm and side, resting her head on his shoulder and purring comfortably.

Smiling a bit more believably now, Harry reached over and scratched the cat behind the ears, wondering idly how she knew his stomach was bothering him. She and Hedwig always seemed to sense when he was upset in any way, and the two of them usually took it upon themselves to distract him with demands for attention or simply be with him until he calmed or his discomfort passed. Grateful for the company since this dream had been particularly bad, Harry glanced curiously toward the window perch that Hedwig usually favored, but the snowy owl was not there.

Grimacing, Harry swallowed with some difficulty and gingerly put his fingers on his throat. For the last couple of days, he'd been a rather unwilling resident in the land of "Not Quite Right." He hesitated to call himself "ill" because his symptoms were actually quite vague, and certainly not enough to disable him. Most of his complaints could easily be blamed on nerves, come to think of it, and heaven knew he had enough to be nervous about. It was probably just a stress reaction, or maybe an after effect from his scar. Besides wondering what Tom, and to a lesser degree, Janet, were going to say to him, Harry was actively dreading the inevitable confrontation with Sirius, Professor Dumbledore and the others. On top of that, Voldemort had been stirred up for the last day or so. Harry had tried to determine the cause, pushing the link as much as he dared, but the dark wizard had neatly (if unwittingly) thwarted his attempts to eavesdrop by not discussing the cause of his agitation with anyone. He didn't even give orders aloud.

Recalling his efforts made Harry growl in frustration. He'd forwarded what little he'd been able to learn to Dumbledore but he hadn't had what one might call staggering success. Well, maybe the 'staggering' part is right, Harry mused wryly as he continued to stroke Patches' soft fur. Keeping tabs on his enemy this way was truly a mixed bag. Any information he managed to learn was good of course, but at best he exhausted himself, and at worst--when he overdid it or when Voldemort managed to fully activate the link--the pain in his head was truly indescribable.

In light of all that, the stomach thing was easy to dismiss as an inconvenience, and until the other shoe dropped with Sirius, and to a lesser degree with Tom and Janet, Harry didn't see things improving much. Distracted for a second Harry frowned curiously. He hadn't seen the Wrights since they left Sunday. He supposed they might have just gotten busy, but it wasn't like Janet to say she'd do something and not follow through. On the other hand, since the Leaky Cauldron didn't have a telephone, they really didn't have a good way to get in touch if something did come up unexpectedly.

"Maybe I should drop by...take them some pumpkin juice," he said to Patches, then winced at the roughness of his voice. Frowning, Harry touched his neck again. The discomfort in his throat, on the other hand, couldn't be explained as easily. As a rule, he wasn't bothered overmuch with illnesses. A good long sleep was usually enough to banish most bugs. On very rare occasions he'd get a stubborn one that would hang around for a day or two, but that was about the extent of it. This time, however, the old "ignore it and it'll go away" tactic he usually favored was failing dismally and he wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

Deciding a drink might help, Harry gently reclaimed his arm from Patches and rose, heading to the wardrobe for a change of clothes before beginning his morning routine. A familiar hoot made him look up and smile, watching as Hedwig swooped through the open window and glided over to perch on the wardrobe door. Before he could even say 'good morning,' she settled one-footed on the door, flapping her wings and screeching animatedly. "What? What is it?" he questioned, noticing that she had something clenched in her right talon. "Is that for me?" he asked in confusion. Hedwig had never acted this way before. Normally when she brought him a "gift" she would unceremoniously drop it on the desk or in his hand and go about her business. Frowning in confusion, he reached out, hoping fervently that it wasn't another gutted rat. His stomach, while better, was still a little iffy.

It wasn't.

Actually, it was worse.

"Pig!" Harry exclaimed in dismay as Hedwig deposited the tiny owl and the letter he carried into his waiting hands. Ron's owl was alarmingly limp and gasping distressingly. At first Harry feared the smaller bird was injured and considered making a dash to Eeylop's Owl Emporium to see if anyone was about. Upon closer inspection, he discovered that Pig seemed to be more exhausted than hurt.

"Easy there, mate," he soothed, untying the letter, and stroking the distressed creature until the small owl got his breath back. "How about some water, hmm?" he suggested, walking Pig over to Hedwig's cage. When the little bird was refreshed and resting comfortably, he turned his attention to Hedwig, who was watching the procedure from her perch on his shoulder. "He'll be okay, thanks to you, clever girl. He just needs a little rest," he said reassuringly, petting her and earning an affectionate ear-nip in return.

Frowning, Harry turned his attention to the letter. "I wonder what happened," he mused, absently weighing the envelope in his hand while Hedwig fluttered off to her perch by the window. The Burrow wasn't that far away, and this letter wasn't exceptionally heavy. Why was Pig in such a state? Shrugging, Harry ripped open the letter, discovering it was from Ron and Hermione.

July 23, 1995

Dear Harry, began Ron's familiar scrawl.

Just so you know, this is the second letter I've written to you in two days. Hopefully Pig will be able to deliver this one. I sent you another with Errol yesterday, but the feathery git must have gotten lost or something because he brought it back here undelivered.

Actually that's a good thing, the letter continued in Hermione's much neater handwriting. It really was a dreadful letter, Ron. You should have known better than to send something like that in the post! Hi, Harry, it's Hermione.

I think he probably worked that out for himself, Ron's quill strokes seemed to scoff, making Harry grin as he imagined the little tug of war that was obviously going on. He'd actually come very close to

running after them this past Sunday. After Tom left, he'd curled up on the bed in a miserable ball, burying his face in the pillow and weighing his options until his brain was whirling like a squirrel in a cage. In the end he'd nodded off and the decision had been taken out of his hands, but Harry wasn't altogether sure he was happy about that.

Sighing, he raked an agitated hand through his hair, firmly shoved any jealous or guilty feelings aside, and turned his attention back to the parchment he held. Just because he was usually exiled in Surrey most of the summer didn't mean they couldn't enjoy visits and outings.

Hermione evidently didn't deign to reply to that last remark because the letter continued in Ron's handwriting. I've had a busy couple of days, mate. I've been dragged up to Hogwarts twice, learned to put my memories in a bowl, learned that you aren't down in Surrey where we thought you were, and that a whole load of people are doing their best to find you. I hope you won't take it the wrong way, but I have to ask, WHERE ARE YOU, AND WHAT THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU PLAYING AT?

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose, his thought processes reduced to something like, They know! Oh, God, they know! Damn, damn, dammit damn, damn, damn! He supposed it was just wishful thinking to imagine he could get away with this all summer, but it had been nice while it lasted. Reluctantly he dragged his eyes back to the page, snorting in spite of himself when he saw a long scratch of ink, then Hermione's handwriting take over. She must have snatched the parchment out from under Ron's quill.

Don't listen to him, Harry, we've been over this a hundred times! Professor Dumbledore made you promise and you're trying to keep your promise, right? We understand that, really, but it isn't necessary anymore. You don't have to hide from us. I really can't wait to see you. You'll have to tell me what spells you found to negate tracking magic. I found some books on the subject in Flourish & Blotts but it looks like it would be really difficult to do.

Lost now, Harry went back to the bed and sat on it, re-reading the last bit in alarm. Negate tracking magic? What was she on about?

Squirming guiltily, he wondered what she would say when she figured out that yes, it had initially been the promise that kept him silent, but now the matter was much less cut and dried. Now he was hiding because...because... Oh just say it Potter, you bloody coward! You're hiding because you like being Jim Patterson and you don't want to be found!

The letter went on, mostly the two of them relaying their news now. Hermione assured him that something could be worked out for London sightseeing, Ron told him about the warding of the Burrow and how Percy had moved out under unpleasant circumstances, and they both told him about his doppelganger in Diagon Alley, asking point blank if he knew anything about that. Every now and then they would slip in little hints about how he'd save himself some grief if he just admitted where he was and let the adults find him, which Harry found a little insulting. How thick did they think he was, anyway?

Childhood experience had taught him that once he was in trouble, he was doomed no matter what. Facts didn't matter, circumstances didn't matter, and punishments were unpleasant and to be avoided or put off as long as possible. In this particular instance, Harry didn't see his situation as salvageable. He would be punished regardless of whether he stayed hidden until the start of term or came forward now, so why rush it? He'd reckoned they'd drag him directly to the headmaster for questioning, and he wasn't daft enough to assume that Professor Dumbledore would gently coax answers out of him with tea and lemon drops. No, the thought of that meeting was enough to make his already queasy stomach clench.

Still... Harry sighed as his eyes skimmed over a paragraph where Hermione had mentioned how worried Sirius was. He had been meaning to write his godfather and try to explain, and he didn't imagine it could make things any worse. Shrugging, Harry spared the clock a quick glance then took out a piece of Order parchment. Wondering where to begin, he picked up his Order quill and sighed.

July, 25, 1995

Dear Sirius,

I've been trying to write to you for a couple of days now, but everything I put down on paper just sounds like rubbish. It's kind of hard to explain something to you that I don't really understand myself. Anyway, I've decided to just write the thing, even though I know it's going to sound stupid.

I suppose I should start by apologizing for my behavior the other night. I just...I don't know. Maybe I should start at the beginning instead and kind of work up to that part.

I guess the story starts on July first at King's Cross Station. No. Wait. It starts a little earlier in the day--at Hogsmeade Station. Professor Dumbledore came up to me while I was waiting for the train with Ron and Hermione...

Slowly, at first, then with more speed, Harry began to share his view on what had occurred at the end of term. He told his godfather how Dumbledore had approached him in Hogsmeade Station and warned him not to stray away from his uncle's house or seek out his friends until told it was safe. He described how he had mistaken a stranger for his uncle at King's Cross Station, and how he had struggled with the situation before finally deciding to travel to Surrey alone.

I promised, you see, he told Sirius, matter-of-factly, and besides, I'd sent Hedwig ahead. She would have worked it out, if I had decided to go to the Leaky Cauldron straightaway, but it seemed sort of rude. Besides, I'm not sure it's safe for her to be there unprotected, if you know what I mean. As it turned out, I shouldn't have worried. The house was empty when I arrived...

That particular memory made Harry pause and close his eyes a moment. The pain of his desertion was softer than it had been at the first of the month, but it was still there. He considered skipping over that part, then decided that it was probably best to just tell the whole ugly story. Taking a steadying breath, he described the dark, empty house, the weather, and his own indecision. He told of how he'd tried one last thing, making a dash for Mrs. Figg's house before finally giving up and catching the Knight Bus to the Leaky Cauldron.

Tom was brilliant, Sirius, he really was. I'm sure I looked a wreck when I arrived, and I was really nervous that I might not be welcome, especially if he believed what that Skeeter cow wrote. He didn't say anything, though. He just welcomed me to his establishment, took me upstairs and settled me into a room, calm as you please. He even cast drying and cleansing spells so I could go straight to bed. My plan, at that point, was to spend the night and then owl someone in the morning.

Pausing again, Harry raked his fingers through his hair, realizing that he'd never told the story from beginning to end to anyone. Tom probably knew the most, but even he didn't know everything. Heck Harry seriously doubted that he knew the entire story himself. He'd spent most of his time ignoring it since the beginning of summer, and never bothered to puzzle through the "whys" behind his thought and motivations. Considering his words carefully, he started to write again. He explained, as best he could, his reluctance to tell anyone about his situation, and how he had realized that he couldn't stay at the Leaky Cauldron as a registered guest. Not wanting to implicate Tom further, he skipped the part about working at the Leaky Cauldron, and simply told Sirius that he had been fortunate enough to cross paths almost immediately with a fellow who needed a hand.

I guess that was why I didn't owl anyone, Harry admitted, as he studied his decisions from a more impersonal point of view. Once I had a place to stay and the means to support myself, there just didn't seem to be a need to. I was okay and the problem was solved. Besides, from the way Professor Dumbledore was talking, it sounded like it wouldn't be long before he let me go to the Burrow. I know you all are busy, so I reckoned I should just stay put and not be a bother. I wasn't trying to make anyone angry or afraid, Sirius. I really thought I was doing the right thing.

Stopping again, Harry pulled a face at the parchment. His earlier intentions and motives were all well and good, but now he was just dancing around the heart of the matter. He envisioned his godfather reading, impatiently waiting for him to get to the bloody point already. Once he'd realized that his elders were looking for him, why did he refuse to tell them what they wanted to know? Why was he still

refusing now? Harry made a frustrated noise as reasons danced merrily in his head.

I know you're probably wondering why I'm refusing to tell you where I am, he stated. I guess it's because I would have gone bloody mad at the Dursleys, especially at the beginning of summer. Hmm. Harry raised an eyebrow and scratched the last bit out. While undeniably true, it made him feel a little exposed, and besides, he wasn't certain Sirius would want a crackpot for a godson.

...because I like it here. I'm normal here. I think I'll actually be sad to leave in September, he tried again, before discarding that as well. He didn't want Sirius to think that he didn't want to live with him anymore, provided of course, that Sirius still wanted him to.

...because I'm afraid if I do tell, you'll let them lock me away again... was his third attempt. Shocked, Harry blinked at what he'd written before scratching it out with much more passion and thoroughness than the previous lines. While it was a pretty fair summation of all his vague fears, there was no way he could tell Sirius that.

Sighing heavily, Harry read over what he'd written, wondering if it would be enough. This was probably the longest letter he'd ever written, with the exception of his initial report to Professor Dumbledore. It wasn't bad as far as it went, but it still seemed rather...incomplete. Glancing at the clock he gave a little start. He'd been at this longer than he thought. Come on, Potter, just finish the ruddy thing, he coached himself.

He tried to think of another reason then finally gave up and started again. In truth, Sirius, I don't really understand it myself. Well, okay, I guess I understand part of it. I don't want to leave. I'm happy here. And I most definitely do not want to return to my aunt and uncle's home--Australia or otherwise. I still feel awful about Cedric dying, but it's better now, if that makes sense. I think the working has helped a lot. It keeps my mind occupied, and when I get really physically tired, I don't dream so much. Regular nightmares, I mean. I can't really do much about the others. I think I may have insulted Mr. Weasley the other night. Please tell him I'm sorry for that. I do want to go to the Burrow for a visit, but I want to come back. That is, if they still want

me to come. I hope you can understand, because I'm not sure I do, and if you've changed your mind about me living with you, will you still write sometimes?

Harry rolled his eyes at the last statement he'd just written. Talk about sounding like a stupid prat. Oh, well, it would just have to do. He couldn't think of anything better to say, the letter was messy enough, and he really needed to close and finish dressing or he'd be late.

I'm making a mess of this, and it's almost time for me to leave, so I think I'll just stop here. I'm sorry, Sirius. I never meant to make you angry. I hope Professor Dumbledore isn't too disappointed. I expect he'll have me serving detentions with Mr. Filch and Professor Snape for the rest of my time at Hogwarts.

Harry

Biting his lower lip, Harry hesitated for a minute, then tapped the paw-print icon on the pages he'd filled and watched the words sink into the parchment. When they had vanished, he checked on Pig again, then carried on with his morning routine, hoping with all his heart that he'd done the right thing, or at the very least that he hadn't made things worse.

Chapter 29 - Appointment with the Minister

July 25, 1995

Sirius Black stood in front of the mirror in Arabella Figg's lounge, glaring at the property it monitored with a ferocity that should have melted the glass. The sight of the house on Privet Drive was enough to make him want to smash the bloody thing to pieces, seven years' bad luck or no.

Sirius had never had a high opinion of his godson's Muggle relatives, but now he found himself tapping reserves of self control that he didn't know he possessed to prevent himself from journeying to Perth and taking care of the Dursleys himself. Even now, two days later, he was still reeling from his most recent meeting at Hogwarts.

The good thing was, the majority of the blind rage he'd felt in the beginning had subsided to a more manageable level. He was still furious, of course, but now he was at least thinking clearly.

Or clearer, anyway.

Sighing, Sirius tore his eyes away from the hated structure, rubbing weary hands down his face. In truth, the meeting really shouldn't have been that much of a shock. From what had been verified and pieced together, they had known or at least strongly suspected that Harry's life with the Dursleys hadn't been all peaches and cream. Those hateful Muggles abandoned Harry for Heaven's sake!

Still, it was one thing to suspect abuse, another thing to hear the suspicions confirmed, and something else entirely to witness an event in living color. Sirius reckoned that everyone, himself included, had been guilty of wishful thinking. Even when someone had noticed something, they hadn't really wanted to believe. In that way they'd proven themselves little better than that idiot, Fudge, always ready with some handy excuse:

Harry claiming his family hated him and didn't understand him could have been so much adolescent angst. He certainly wouldn't be the first teenaged wizard at Hogwarts to feel that way.

Even after the window bars thing came to light, proving there was truth in Harry's claim, they'd consoled themselves by noting that the Dursleys seemed more reactive than proactive. That didn't excuse their behavior by any means, but perhaps these were isolated events.

Poor choices made in the heat of the moment.

Overreactions to occasional mishaps.

An unfortunate inability to deal with stress in a civilized manner.

Aberrations in other words, not the norm. Bars on Harry's window couldn't possibly be an example of everyday life!

Snorting bitterly, Sirius began to pace as his mind wandered back to the last meeting at Hogwarts he'd attended a couple of days ago. He and Remus had been summoned to the Headmaster's office along with Filius, Minerva, and Poppy Pomfrey.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," Dumbledore had greeted, after everyone was present. His tone was brisk, almost short, and there had been an unusual hint of gravity in his demeanor. Worse yet was the headmaster's appearance. Albus had looked dreadful--absolutely knackered. He had also hesitated in a manner quite unlike himself before he finally announced, "Some new information has come to light with regard to young Mr. Potter."

Sirius had jumped on that immediately, grinning broadly and drawing relieved smiles from his companions. "He's been found then?" he'd questioned, looking around eagerly. "Where is he? Is he here? Harry!"

Dumbledore, instead of appearing relieved or gently chiding the Animagus for his impatience, had looked even older and more tired than before. "Forgive me, Sirius. I did not mean to give you the wrong impression. The news I have is not related to our search efforts. Rather, it has to do with Mr. Potter himself."

Dumbledore had paused a moment more, as though searching for words, then appeared to grow impatient with himself. "There is no

easy way to say this, so I'll just get on with it. Before proceeding I must caution you that this is an official school meeting regarding a student, and anything discussed must be kept in the strictest confidence."

Sirius had thought this a rather inauspicious opening and felt the fine hairs on his neck begin to rise as the headmaster peered at each of them in turn. When Dumbledore was satisfied that they all understood, he had continued.

"As you all know, concerns have sprung up this summer regarding Harry Potter and his Muggle relatives. I have looked into the matter, and regret to say that these concerns were not unfounded."

Sirius paused in his pacing, recalling the sinking sensation the old wizard's words had caused. With that one statement, Dumbledore had swept away all the excuses and forced them to stop kidding themselves. The fact that Albus himself had misjudged the matter was very cold comfort. Almost against his will he found himself drawn back to the mirror, looking at the silent house while Dumbledore's words echoed in his head.

"Information has come to light during the course of my research that you should be aware of. Sirius is here as godfather, of course, Remus was invited because of the rather spectacular results of his tutoring during Mr. Potter's third year and you three," here Albus indicated Pomfrey, McGonagall, and Flitwick, "are here as Mr. Potter's Mediwitch and primary spellcasting instructors."

"Potter's spellcasting Albus?"

Sirius had felt a warm rush of pride when McGonagall shared a puzzled frown with Flitwick, then spoke up in her student's defense. "While I will admit that the boy could apply himself to his studies a bit more assiduously, there has never been any question about his magical talent or ability."

"No, he has performed as well as any other incoming student, but only as well, I think."

Dumbledore had let the implications of that statement hang in the air for a moment before continuing. "Right or wrong, I believe we expected better than average performance out of the Boy Who Lived when he came to Hogwarts. We believed him capable of more."

Sirius had been a little miffed at that, but it had been Remus who'd voiced the objection. Ah, Remus, what would we do without you, mate? Sirius thought, smiling fondly at his friend who was currently dozing in one of Arabella's comfortable armchairs. The amber-eyed wizard was normally so congenial and self-effacing, it was easy to forget the beast he carried within him.

The wolf had been in fine fighting form that day, however, Sirius recalled with a smirk. As soon as the Headmaster finished speaking, Remus had jumped in, almost bristling with indignation. "With respect, Headmaster, Harry is capable of more. He managed a corporeal Patronus in his Third Year, which is ridiculously advanced magic!"

Dumbledore had quickly moved to soothe him before even more fur flew. "You misunderstand, Remus. I was not belittling Mr. Potter's accomplishments, but given what he has shown himself capable of, do you not find it odd for him to struggle so with more basic ideas?"

Sirius had answered that one. He and Remus had gone over this at length just a few nights ago. "If you're referring to the Summoning Charm, that was probably nerves," he had stated firmly. "Harry was upset with Ron and he had the bloody First Task coming up. That would be enough to throw anyone off their game!"

The others had nodded their agreement. "Initial difficulties aside, Mr. Potter eventually mastered the Summoning Charm, and used it most effectively," Filius added proudly.

"That is true," Albus conceded. "Mr. Potter was dealing with undeniably stressful circumstances on that particular occasion. Had it been an odd incident, I would not be so concerned, but alas, it was not. He has had similar difficulties with Wingardium Leviosa and others over the years. No, I regret to say, we are dealing with a little more than a student's poor performance as a result of a bad day."

Sirius rolled his eyes as he remembered the headmaster's understated words. That was like saying the North Sea had a little more water than your average mud puddle.

Taking the reins again, Dumbledore had explained his strategy for removing Harry from the Dursleys, and briefed them on the "impressions" Dobby had gathered.

"Sorting through the impressions was very tedious and time-consuming," he explained, retrieving his wand. "Fortunately, Severus came to deliver a report when I was first examining them. The skimming ladle Dobby provided is a useful but rather literal tool. It required a rather subtle line of questioning for maximum effectiveness. Severus made several suggestions that allowed me to get to the heart of the matter much more quickly. As it turned out, wording was everything. I had started with words like 'starved' and 'beaten'. 'Underfed' and 'struck' yielded much better results."

Sirius had been a little taken aback by that bit of news, and had protested Snape's involvement. As usual, this line of proved ineffective with the Headmaster, so he'd subsided fairly quickly. At least the greasy git hadn't been present for the meeting. Of course he wasn't one of Harry's spellcasting professors.

"Viewing all the house impressions would take literally years, so in the interest of time, I selected a representative sample," Dumbledore continued, after Sirius' ruffled feathers had been at least partially smoothed. "One incident in particular seems to address most of the issues at hand. I also believe it is an indicator of just how long the folder has been malfunctioning," he lectured, drawing their attention to a largish Pensieve on his desk.

"Wait, Albus," McGonagall had interrupted when Albus raised his wand, preparing to activate the Pensieve. "Wouldn't it be best to simply tell us what disturbed you so?" she asked, looking uncomfortable.

Dumbledore, Sirius noted, had the appearance of a man who had argued long and hard with himself about that very issue. "I do not wish to intrude upon Mr. Potter's privacy any more than necessary,

Minerva. However, I fear I might not be able to adequately describe what I wish you to see. The event could have repercussions on his future schooling, and there is every possibility that one of you might spot something I missed." Raising his wand again, Dumbledore held it at the ready. "Brace yourselves," he warned as he tapped the Pensieve with his wand, "being immersed in non-sentient impressions is rather jarring."

Truer words were never spoken, Sirius reflected, recalling the experience, and marveling again at the professor's gift of understatement. He had dealt with Pensieves before on a rather limited basis, but Dumbledore was right. This was altogether different. The house's impressions took over in a much more forceful way than human thought, making the headmaster's office vanish, and bringing its own prissy interior to the fore. While he and the others fought to regain their equilibrium, Dumbledore calmly lectured.

On one hand, the old man's unflappable attitude was reassuring. On the other hand, it had also made Sirius want to smack him.

"From what I have been able to gather, the first twelve to eighteen months that Mr. Potter lived with his Muggle relatives were relatively uneventful," Albus said, unconsciously slipping into his professorial tones. "Mrs. Dursley very obviously favored her own son, and she and her husband were not as demonstrative towards Harry as one might wish or expect, but all his physical needs were met."

Remembering the Dursleys made Sirius angry all over again. He glared at the house in the mirror and gave a disdainful snort. After the meeting was over, Dumbledore had reluctantly given Sirius permission to investigate the Pensieve himself. It hadn't taken long for Black to decide that it was fear of possible discovery or consequences that kept Petunia Dursley in line, rather than any altruistic tendencies she might possess. The woman obviously considered Harry an inconvenience at best, a freak of nature at worst, and squandered all her love and care on her own unappreciative brat.

Still, he had to admit Dumbledore was right. Compared to later, the first year or so that Harry had spent in Surrey had been exemplary. Caring for two toddlers could be a challenge, so for Petunia's

convenience, Harry had slept in a little cot in Dudley's bedroom. He was never a favorite in the family, and always came in a distant second in his aunt and uncle's affections, but in the beginning they had at least tolerated him.

Once, Petunia had noted the lack of magical activity and theorized rather hopefully that the trauma to the head Harry had suffered might have rendered him "normal". Sirius had nearly choked when he'd stumbled across that one. Idiot Muggle, he thought contemptuously, as he glared at Privet Drive once again for good measure. How dare she wish Squib status on Harry! Frowning, Sirius turned from the image again before he gave into temptation and cursed the Dursleys into next week.

When he'd entered the Pensieve with the others, he'd thought he'd had a pretty good idea of what he was going to see. Forewarned and primed for the worst, Sirius had dredged up every bit of his Gryffindor courage and steeled himself for the sight of Harry hurt or worse. As the scene stabilized he had been rather taken aback when the sound of childish laughter greeted him.

Laughter? Sirius had raised a questioning eyebrow at Remus, and received a perplexed shrug in return. Almost as one, the group had turned questioning eyes to Albus, silently asking for an explanation. Was he sure he had called up the right impression?

Dumbledore hadn't responded directly to the unvoiced question. Instead he simply gestured for the rest to follow, and led them through the doorway that opened into the lounge. Once inside, the source of the merriment became clear. Sirius had felt his jaw drop in disbelief as he surveyed the scene, barely acknowledging similar displays of wonder from his companions.

Dudley Dursley, who could not have been more than three, clapped and squealed in delight as an equally youthful Harry Potter grinned broadly. Sweeping his arms through the air, Harry was making several of the toys scattered about float and twirl in lazy circles around his cousin.

Sirius and Remus had watched in fascination for a couple of minutes along with everyone else, then it occurred to them what Harry was doing. "Carousel! He's playing carousel, Sirius!" Remus had whispered, using the name Lily had given the game while Sirius nodded excitedly. "I can't believe he remembered that!"

The dark-haired wizard half-smiled at the memory. Everyone had been pleased and amazed, of course, but Sirius had to admit that Flitwick had probably been the most excited. The little Charms professor had been almost beside himself with delight. "Albus!" Filius had squeaked gleefully, "he has perfect control of at least two dozen objects! Wandlessly! Do you realize what this means?"

"Yes," Dumbledore had replied, smiling seemingly in spite of himself, as Harry spread his arms and spun in circles along with the toys. "Mr. Potter's cousin had an unfortunate tendency to poke and torment him. This was his rather ingenious method of distracting young Mr. Dursley," he explained, then suddenly looked very grave.

Sirius had just opened his mouth to ask what the matter was, when the answer became horrifyingly clear. Dudley had grinned at Harry and demanded, "Duddy up!" Harry had innocently complied about the same time the elder Dursleys had peeked in through the hall door to see what their "little poppet" was up to, and the situation had deteriorated rapidly.

Not unexpectedly Petunia had shrieked in horror, startling Harry and breaking his concentration. The entire lot of flying objects had gone tumbling to the ground in a series of thumps and frightened wails. Sirius reckoned the cousin was more surprised than hurt, especially with all that padding, but the parents clearly didn't share that view.

It had been a mistake. Even Sirius had been forced to admit that. Angry as he was, the uncle hadn't truly intended to cause physical injury. While Petunia snatched Dudley off the floor and began to soothe his tears, Vernon rushed forward with an inarticulate roar of rage and seized Harry's small arm in his sausage-like fingers. He'd yanked the boy around, presumably to spank him or lead him to the "time out" chair and...

Crack!

Sirius ground his teeth together and clenched his fists, recalling the small sharp sound of the snapping bone and Harry's terrified, pain-filled shriek. He'd hoped the malfunction had occurred later and Harry had been watched over at least through his toddlerhood, but no. The folder's alert mechanism had failed earlier than even Dumbledore had guessed. At the tender age of three, Harry had been essentially on his own in a hostile environment, and no one had been the wiser.

The unfairness of the whole mess made Sirius' blood boil. If anyone had come to the house at that moment, Harry's arm would have been healed with a single wand-wave, and he almost certainly would have been removed from his relatives' care, or at least monitored more closely if the Ministry wanted to push the issue of blood protection.

What happened? What went wrong? Sirius wondered, resuming his agitated pacing. While it was true that his godson had never been severely beaten or molested, thank heavens, years of living in that atmosphere of tension and unreasoning fear had clearly left its mark. Some of Harry's behaviors and mannerisms that he'd found odd in the past made more sense now.

Cringing, Sirius privately admitted that loosing his frustrated anger on the boy when they'd "spoken" via the enchanted parchment probably hadn't been the best decision he'd ever made. Hell, given his godson's background, it was possible, highly likely even, that Harry was frightened or mistrustful of him now!

Wonderful. Just bloody brilliant. Sirius growled, shaking his head in disgust.

To give credit where it was due, Vernon and Petunia Dursley had actually been rather horrified at what had happened, even if "what will others think" or "what will happen to us" had more to do with their distress than their nephew's injury.

Forgotten, Harry had hugged his broken arm to his chest and paled until his face was the color of milk. His large green eyes grew wide

and glassy, and for a minute or two he seemed to be in very real danger of fainting dead away.

Not that Sirius and the rest of Dumbledore's group of observers had been in much better shape by that point. Time seemed to stop. No one moved or even breathed for the space of several heartbeats, each trying to process what they'd just witnessed. At length, McGonagall found her tongue.

"You think some of his magic may be subconsciously blocked, Albus?" she asked in a clipped little voice, shaking Sirius out of his own shocked stupor. Turning, to face his companions, he had been a little surprised at the intensity of their reactions.

Remus' anger, he was expecting. Moony, he knew, would be as furious as he was, but it had been profoundly unnatural to see the usually unflappable Madame Pomfrey gripping and releasing her wand in a show of helpless frustration. Professor Flitwick was alternately wringing his hands and clenching his fists, and McGonagall...

Sirius shook his head in awe. The Transfiguration professor had been standing ramrod-straight and peering at him through her square glasses in a very no-nonsense way. In the majority of Sirius' experience with the witch, that posture usually meant a student was about to get their head handed to them. At least a dozen handy excuses came to mind before he realized that McGonagall's focus wasn't him. She had actually been looking over his left shoulder at the headmaster, and her angry look had a very "I Told You So" feel to it. Her eyes were suspiciously bright as well, and the small part of Sirius' brain that wasn't busy being stunned and furious wondered if McGonagall had been against leaving Harry with his Muggle relatives all those years ago. Intrigued, he made a mental note to discuss it with Remus later.

Dumbledore, for his part, had stepped forward and met his deputy's accusing glare without comment. When it became clear that she wasn't going to back down, he sighed and answered her question. "It is possible, Minerva. When we find Mr. Potter, it might be enlightening to have him take some of the proficiency tests we give to

our incoming Muggleborns. We shall get to that shortly, but for now there is a bit more," he admitted, including the others in his address and looking apologetic. "Be assured that the worst is over," he said, waving his wand and allowing the scene to move forward again.

Up until that moment, Sirius had reckoned the "time stopping" sensation he'd experienced earlier had just been shock. At that moment he'd cottoned on to the fact that Dumbledore had just been allowing them time to gather themselves.

Once back in motion, things began to happen very fast. The elder Dursleys had soon worked themselves into a full blown panic. They'd babbled nonsensically about what they were going to say, now that the "freaks" were coming.

Would the boy be leaving?

Would they be blamed? Punished?

It was an accident, of course. Anyone with eyes could see that!

Sirius had winced at the unnatural angle of Harry's arm when Petunia finally remembered him. Surrendering Dudley to Vernon's care, she'd grabbed her nephew (by his good arm at least), dragged him upstairs to his cot, and left him there, crying and uncomfortable.

"A few hours passed," Dumbledore said at that point, sweeping his wand around in a clockwise motion that mercifully made the memory speed up. Harry cried for a while before eventually succumbing to sleep, all the while hugging his injured arm tightly against himself.

"When no one arrived, the Dursleys determined that they would have to deal with Mr. Potter's injury on their own," Dumbledore commented while the images flew by. Now," he said, making the impression flow in real time again, "observe what occurred."

Madam Pomfrey saw the change at once. "Albus! His arm!" she exclaimed, rushing forward and trying to run a diagnostic in spite of herself. She made a frustrated noise when she encountered a mere memory instead of a solid flesh-and-blood boy, but even to Sirius'

untrained eye, Harry's arm looked much better. Petunia hadn't seemed to notice or care and had soon ungraciously bustled her nephew off to get him checked over.

Dumbledore had sped up the events again while they were gone for which Sirius was profoundly grateful. He wasn't sure he'd have been able to stomach Vernon fretting about how this was going to affect his chances of promotion, or Dudley whining to be fed or entertained.

When Petunia returned, Albus allowed the impression to resume a normal pace. "Well?" Vernon demanded impatiently before she'd even had time to remove her coat.

"It was nothing, Vernon," Petunia had replied, looking a little shell-shocked. Mechanically, she removed Harry's jacket, exposing the new cast he sported before shooing him away. "They examined the arm, and only found a little hairline fracture. I told them the boy had a small accident...fell...they didn't question it."

"But..."

"I know."

"But his arm..."

"I know! "

"How, then?"

"I haven't the slightest."

"Do you think they came here without us noticing?"

"I don't know. It's possible, I suppose, unless the wards take care of that sort of thing or the boy healed it himself."

"About that, Pet, I'm as sympathetic as the next fellow, but I can't allow such goings on in this household. What will people think?"

"Surely you aren't suggesting that I fancy it!"

"No, no, of course not, but there must be something we can do!"

Watching, Sirius had felt the same sort of horrified fascination usually associated with witnessing an accident--aghast at what was happening, and yet unable to look away.

It had been amazing how they'd convinced themselves that they had no choice--that the magic had to be "stamped out" of their nephew. Instead of being relieved that Harry's arm had been mostly mended, she and Vernon had become even more antagonistic towards the boy, certain that some "freak" must have come and given aid without their knowledge.

Not too surprisingly, Harry had been moved out of Dudley's room because of safety concerns. At first he'd been put in the toy room, then they'd begun to worry about him somehow "sabotaging" or "contaminating" Dudley's toys. Petunia hadn't wanted to give up her guest room, since Marge Dursley was a regular visitor, so eventually he'd ended up in the cupboard under the stairs of all places!

Dudley, not understanding why his favorite game had been discontinued, resumed his habits of picking on Harry. It hadn't taken long for his frustrated pokes and shoves to turn to punches, and since his parents never corrected him, the aggressive behavior continued unabated. For all Sirius knew, it might have still been going on.

What a mess, Sirius thought, raking an agitated hand through his hair.

After the first incident ended, and Harry had been moved to his cupboard, the images shown began to go faster. The other Impressions Dumbledore had selected skipped time and tended to show snapshots of Harry's life rather than full instances. A fact that had surprised everyone was that the cousin had caused more physical damage than his parents did--he and those "friends" of his. The results were always the same, though. On the occasions he was caught by Dudley's gang, Harry would slip into his cupboard scuffed and bruised, and emerge the next morning looking as though nothing had happened.

Worst of all, the exquisite control Harry had demonstrated seemed to have been destroyed. He never consciously initiated magic after that day, and instead became prone to wild spurts of accidental magic when sufficiently stressed. This, of course, did nothing to endear him to his Muggle family, and the vicious circle continued to spin.

Sirius found his gaze drawn to the house yet again, and uttered a very doglike growl. It had somehow escaped those blockheads' notice that keeping Harry calm and happy would have minimized or eliminated those incidents entirely. Once again the desire to journey to Australia and rip them limb from limb asserted itself. The dark-haired wizard looked at Arabella's fireplace longingly. It would only take a few minutes...

"Sirius?"

Pulled from his unpleasant plans and memories, Sirius turned to find Remus watching him. "Alright?" the werewolf asked, frowning worriedly.

"Yeah," Sirius responded, deflating a little.

Always able to sniff out lies, Remus arched a dubious brow. "Are you sure?" he pressed.

Sirius sighed. "No," he admitted sulkily. Truthfully he felt ready to fly into a thousand tiny pieces, and wanted to hit something. Hard.

It had been agony trying to keep himself together during the meeting. He'd managed, but only by a very narrow margin. The strain, the desire to just do something, had been incredible, and when Arthur Weasley, Ron and Hermione had arrived his control had very nearly snapped. You were supposed to be his friends! Why didn't you help him? Why didn't you see? he'd wanted to shout. Only the knowledge that he was being unreasonable had allowed him to maintain a modicum of control.

Ron and Hermione had also helped their cause in Sirius' eyes by being touchingly loyal to Harry. They cooperated with their

headmaster, but only as far as they felt they could without contacting Harry first.

"I think Arabella's gotten over most of her upset," Remus offered uncertainly, dragging Sirius back to the present and making him wince at the memory. After everyone left, Sirius had asked for some time to examine the impressions in more detail. Dumbledore had strongly suggested that he take a little time before examining the Pensieve but Sirius had been adamant, so the headmaster had allowed him a brief look. He'd kept himself together splendidly during most of the meeting, but the Pensieve had finally been his undoing.

By the time he'd returned to Magnolia Crescent he'd been beyond furious. It made him sick how the Dursleys' unreasoning fear had compelled them to belittle Harry, to underfeed him, lock him away, and to withdraw even the small amount of care he'd been given at first. When he'd floored in and caught sight of Arabella dozing on the couch while Remus kept watch he'd finally snapped, and poor Arabella had borne the brunt of his helpless anger and frustration. He'd castigated the witch so severely that she'd fled up the stairs in tears.

Later, he'd regretted it and had apologized. Unless she happened on Harry when he was newly injured, which wasn't often, there was very little solid evidence for her to go on. Petunia had always pleaded expense when questioned about her nephew's clothing, and Harry himself was frighteningly good at adapting and keeping his own secrets.

Realizing Remus was still watching him, Sirius tried to articulate his dilemma. "Harry tried to please his relatives, Moony, he truly did. He wanted nothing more than some small sign of love and acceptance, especially in the beginning," he said, recalling how he had watched with an aching heart as his godson's attempts to win his relatives over met with failure again and again. "Eventually he just gave up and begun to withdraw. You can almost pinpoint the moment when he decided enough was enough, and he was young, Moony! Still just a little thing. He stopped reaching out, stopped asking for help and just went his own way. We're all furious that Harry didn't come to us,

but he never really had anyone to go to. It probably never occurred to him," he said with a heavy sigh. "Remus, how can we help him?"

The irony of the situation wasn't lost on Remus. "I don't know, Paddy," he admitted sadly. "Come on. We'll think of something," he coaxed, obviously trying to cheer Sirius up. "Right now let's just be grateful that he was strong enough to survive with his spirit intact."

"Mostly intact, anyway," Sirius agreed gloomily, fiddling with one of Arabella's knickknacks. Harry was remarkably strong willed and tenacious, despite the Dursleys' efforts to keep him as downtrodden as possible, but now that he knew what to look for, Sirius thought he could see subtle signs of what the boy had endured.

"He doesn't trust us," he summed up abruptly, after thinking a few minutes in silence.

"He trusts us in his own way," Remus disagreed, "and he trusts you over everyone else, so don't bloody forget that," he continued, shaking a scolding finger. "If he chooses to confide in anyone it will most likely be you."

"Bollocks," Sirius retorted with an impatient swipe of his hand. "If he trusts me so bloody much why is he acting like this? And don't you dare say it's because of that scene in Dumbledore's office the other night."

"Well not entirely, anyway. You must admit that it probably didn't help matters, though," Remus pointed out. He looked like he was about to continue but was interrupted when their stack of Order parchment rang for attention.

"What does he want now?" Sirius grumbled, expecting yet another "errand" for one of them from Dumbledore, or worse, another "meeting". Stalking over to his stack of paper, he froze in surprise when he recognized Harry's writing on top.

"What? What is it?" Remus asked, alarmed.

"It's from Harry!" Sirius crowed, grinning realistically for the first time in days as he snatched the pages from the top of the stack. "It's a letter from Harry!"

"Excellent! What does he say?" Remus asked eagerly, brightening with a smile of his own.

"Well if you'll pipe down, I'll tell you," Sirius responded, smoothing out the pages and clearing his throat. " 'Dear Sirius,' " he began, " 'I've been trying to write to you for a couple of days now, but everything I put down on paper just sounds like rubbish. It's kind of hard to explain something to you that I don't really understand myself. Anyway, I've decided to just write the thing, even though I know it's going to sound stupid.' " Sirius stopped and glanced up at Remus. "Hmm. We really should speak to Harry about that towering self confidence of his. No wonder Snape thinks he's arrogant."

Remus snorted in spite of himself. "Give him a break, Paddy. We didn't have all the answers at fifteen either."

"True enough, Mr. Moony. Mr. Padfoot concedes your point and respectfully asks for permission to continue."

"Mr. Moony observes that Mr. Padfoot's critique was the cause of the interruption, however Mr. Moony will grant permission for expediency's sake," Remus replied, slipping into their old Hogwarts debating style without missing a beat.

"Yeah, yeah," Sirius said, brushing off the details with a wave of his hand before returning to the letter. " 'I suppose I should start by apologizing for my behavior the other night. I just...I don't know. Maybe I should start at the beginning instead and kind of work up to that part. I guess the story starts on July first at King's Cross Station. No. Wait. It starts a little earlier in the day--at Hogsmeade Station. Professor Dumbledore came up to me while I was waiting for the train with Ron and Hermione. I was a little excited, I guess. I was really hoping I'd be allowed to go directly to the Burrow, but he said it was too dangerous, and that Surrey was the safest place for me and for them.' "

Frowning, Sirius began to summarize. "He talks about mistaking someone for his uncle at King's Cross and catching a train to Little Whinging, and finding the house empty. You were right, he did go to Arabella's before catching the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley," he commented absently to Remus, then snorted in disbelief. "He was afraid Tom would be frightened or turn him away. Please. Have you ever known Tom to refuse anyone? He also says he was planning to spend one night, then owl someone in the morning."

"Well that seems reasonable. What changed his mind?"

Sirius raked a hand through his hair, torn between amusement and exasperation. "It appears that he ran across his mysterious employer fairly quickly, and once his living arrangements were taken care of, he was prepared to just hunker down and wait it out. He reckoned he shouldn't "bother" us. Says he wasn't sure how we'd react."

"Are you saying he was embarrassed ?" Remus blurted, aghast, even as he tried to understand where Harry was coming from. "He thinks we'd blame him because those ignorant Muggles turned tail and ran?"

"That's about the size of it," Sirius said, continuing to scan the letter, "but he still doesn't say why--ah! Here we go. 'I know you're probably wondering why I'm refusing to tell you where I am. I guess it's because...' " Sirius raised an eyebrow and trailed off.

"Because what?" Remus finally demanded, watching impatiently as his friend frowned and scanned the letter intently.

"I don't know," Sirius said, flipping the page around so Lupin could see the numerous scratched out lines. "Looks like he doesn't either. Even says so here," he stated, pointing to where the handwriting began again. "See? 'In truth, Sirius, I don't really understand it myself. Well, okay, I guess I understand part of it. I don't want to leave. I'm happy here. And I most definitely do not want to return to my aunt and uncle's home--Australia or otherwise.' " he read, then looked hurt. "Am I reading this right? Does he honestly think that he's going to be sent back to his worthless relatives?"

Remus sighed heavily. "He might at that," he admitted reluctantly. "It would explain quite a lot, don't you agree?"

Sirius refused to be pacified. "What does he take us for? How could he even entertain the notion?"

"Oh, please! Dumbledore all but ordered him not to contact anyone. Besides, he knows your hands are tied at the moment. What are you going to do? Waltz into the Ministry of Magic and sue for custody?"

"I might," Sirius retorted, rising to the challenge.

"Don't be daft. You'd be back in Azkaban or worse before you could even say two words, and where would that leave Harry?"

"Harry seems to be getting along just bloody fine," Sirius retorted petulantly. "It's obvious he thinks he doesn't need anyone."

"Uh-huh. So that's why he's telling you about having nightmares and visions, and stressing over whether you and the Weasleys still want him?" Remus asked dryly, moving to read over Sirius' shoulder.

"What?"

"Maybe you should finish reading the letter before jumping to conclusions, bonehead."

"Shut it, I was getting there."

"Quite. With the grace and speed of a crippled flobberworm, I might add."

Sirius pulled a face then quickly scanned the rest of the letter. "What the bloody hell is he on about? 'If you've changed your mind about me living with you' indeed! He must be joking! And the Weasleys! Doesn't he know how many times Molly asked if he could stay? Is he serious? He can't be serious! Tell me he's not serious!"

"No, that would be you," Remus grinned, then sobered. "All kidding aside, Paddy, I think Harry's dead serious."

"This just gets better and better, doesn't it?" Sirius muttered, flopping dejectedly on the couch.

A wizard's work is never done, Lucius Malfoy sighed to himself as he strode importantly through the Ministry of Magic with the Minister himself at his side. They had been in meetings most of the morning, and were now off to enjoy an early lunch once the minister dropped some papers off at his office.

Cornelius Fudge, as had become his habit since the night of the Dark Lord's rebirth, was trotting along fretting about Albus Dumbledore and that insufferable Potter brat.

Potter.

Lucius unconsciously tightened his grip on his serpent-headed walking stick when he recalled how the boy had slipped out of their grasp, but managed to keep all traces of annoyance from his expression. Instead, he molded his features into an mask of attention and made little noises of agreement or consolation where appropriate while the minister continued his monologue.

Fudge wasn't saying anything of import at the moment, so Malfoy let him babble and continued his analysis. For the life of him, he couldn't comprehend why that idiot, Barty Crouch, had used a "round trip" portkey spell. The man obviously had less than a thimbleful of sense, or the spellcasting ability of a Mudblood if that was the best he could manage. All those years under the Imperious Curse must have permanently damaged his brain.

As he continued down the corridor Malfoy cursed their bad luck. He would have never made such an obvious mistake! Presenting prisoners with an escape route on a silver platter was not a sound plan. Especially prisoners who had proven troublesome in the past. The most dunderheaded first year at Hogwarts should be able to deduce that! Unfortunately for the Dark Lord, Crouch and that worthless Pettigrew were the only Death Eaters available who could perform long term tasks without being missed. Lucius and most of the others were employed, or at the very least had friends and family, and couldn't simply vanish for months on end.

Inconvenient, that. The scene in the graveyard would have played out very differently if someone competent had been in charge and Potter had been trapped without a convenient ride back to Hogwarts. Wounded as he was, the boy wouldn't have gotten very far on foot. He would have tired quickly and been easy prey.

Relishing the thought, Lucius fingered the fangs of his serpent-head walking stick, thinking of the blade hidden within. Oh, yes. Very differently indeed.

Potter's escape had infuriated the Dark Lord, of course, but he had been surprisingly lenient in the "punishments" he handed out. The Death Eaters left standing empty-handed in the wake of the trophy portkey had expected to suffer grievously for the error, but the Dark Lord had other plans. Instead of torturing them for hours on end, he had put them to work getting his old manor house set to rights instead of merely "habitable" which was all that idiot Pettigrew could manage. He'd only thrown in an occasional Crucio to keep them on their toes.

Luckily, Lucius still had the Malfoy fortune at his disposal, which was very useful in avoiding some of the more menial jobs. Compared to most of the other Death Eaters, he was actually getting off ridiculously easy. All the Dark Lord wanted from him was political intrigue, galleons from the Malfoy vault, and a chance to "recruit" Draco once the boy turned sixteen. Shaking his head slightly, Malfoy had to appreciate his master's choice of wording. He actually made it sound like the boy had a choice!

That Crouch had missed this "discipline," annoyed his fellow Death Eaters to no end, especially since the Dark Lord's abysmally horrible mood was entirely his fault. Lucius supposed being given the Dementor's Kiss settled the score to some small degree, but it lacked the satisfaction of taking matters into his own hands. At any rate the simpleton was silenced before he could do any damage, and anyone who was that susceptible to the Imperious Curse was probably an unwanted liability, anyway.

Speaking of liabilities, Cornelius was still going at it. It was amazing how he never seemed to run out of things to say. On the other hand,

he did have his uses. To give credit where it was due, Fudge's actions with regard to Crouch had brought about their current course of action. The minister's public face was that of a wise and kindly wizard, but on the night of the Dark Lord's rebirth he had shown himself capable of swift, vicious, even foolhardy action when he felt threatened.

The irony of the situation was delicious. Potter literally had them dead to rights. He had seen his classmate murdered, witnessed the rebirth ceremony, knew how the Dark Lord had survived all those years and heard him call most if not all of the responding Death Eaters by name. He could identify them all and have them sent to Azkaban in an instant, but because of his age, some poor choices on the boy's part and some unkind twists of fate, no one would believe him!

Draco and the esteemed Potions Master, Severus Snape, kept Lucius up-to-date with school events, so he knew quite a lot about the happenings at Hogwarts. Thanks primarily to Rita Skeeter and the Sirius Black fiasco, Potter's word was considered suspect at best by the minister. No one had even bothered to test the validity of his story.

Not that that was a bad thing, of course, or even that unusual, now that he pondered it. Weasley was always blathering about some "innocent until proven guilty" rubbish that the Muggles favored, but Lucius personally didn't see the point. Trials were expensive and seemed a waste of time and money, especially when facts spoke so eloquently for themselves. Narcissa's cousin had been carted off to Azkaban and left to rot without anyone even bothering to take a statement. Likewise, according to Severus, the authorities hadn't interrogated Crouch on the night of June 24th. He'd simply been given the Kiss, no questions asked.

With Crouch so conveniently silenced, their main problems were Potter and Dumbledore. Potter, since he was the only outsider who knew the truth, and Dumbledore, who was the only person with any power who appeared to believe him. Both were too well protected to attack openly, hence the current campaign to discredit them utterly. A good deal of the general Wizard public blindly believed anything they read, especially if it was an article in the Daily Prophet.

Glancing smugly at the flustered wizard beside him, Lucius silently congratulated himself. It was one of his better ideas. Since he was already on friendly terms with Cornelius Fudge, the Dark Lord had tasked him with cultivating the minister's paranoid side and gently guiding him down the garden path. He was grateful for the opportunity to smile openly when the minister made a small jest. Oh, Fudge was embarrassingly easy to manipulate! All he really had to do was tell the minister what he wanted to hear, and slip in a few "helpful" suggestions during the course of conversation.

Speaking of which...Lucius weighed his options. He supposed he probably should actually say something--pearls before swine and all that--but on the other hand they had practically reached their destination. Perhaps something quick and pithy, then. He regretted not listening well for maybe half a second before an opportunity to be "helpful" presented itself in the form of one Albus Dumbledore. They were coming up on the minister's office and Lucius, who had the advantage of height, could see the aged wizard in the waiting area, speaking to Arthur Weasley's spawn. How delightful.

Fudge was still going on at length about the Hogwarts headmaster, so Lucius could make himself look like a hero by simply telling the other wizard to cease his accursed babbling.

As long as he phrased it nicely, of course.

"Forgive me for interrupting, Minister, but isn't that the Headmaster now?" he asked, doing his best to sound mildly surprised.

As hoped Fudge broke off immediately. "What?" he gasped, looking horrified. Lucius enjoyed a few seconds of silence while the other wizard stepped in front of him and peered ahead, then sighed mentally when the minister piped up again, this time feverishly thanking him.

"Oh, good show, Lucius! Very good show indeed! The old fellow may be a bit touched in the head, but it's very bad form to go around insulting wizards to their faces!"

"Very bad form indeed, Minister," Lucius agreed sagely. It's easier and much safer to insult them behind their backs.

"Still I wonder what he's doing here," Cornelius frowned in confusion. "I distinctly recall Mr. Weasley--Percival that is--informing me he had an appointment in two weeks' time, not today!"

Lucius nodded, hiding his acute interest behind a bland facade while his mind began to click through the possibilities. Fudge had already told him Weasley junior's account of Weasley senior making an appointment for the headmaster. At the time he'd dismissed it as some routine matter, especially if Dumbledore was content to wait. Since Dumbledore was obviously willing to push the issue, his errand might be of interest to his master. He'd have to tread carefully so as not to be ejected from the proceedings. "Perhaps he wishes to reschedule," he speculated with a shrug. "Or perhaps he's been in contact with Potter again and has more shocking news for you," he quipped, getting one last dig in before they entered.

The two wizards shared a knowing look, then paused a second more so Fudge could don his 'congenial but very busy' persona before entering. "Headmaster Dumbledore!" he exclaimed as he walked briskly through the door. "Absolutely lovely to see you--"

"And you as well, Minister," Albus replied smoothly, cutting Fudge off before he could get to the 'so sorry, but I really don't have time to chat' part. Lucius hung back and stayed silent, enjoying the show. Dumbledore might be one of the Dark Lord's major opponents, but he had to admit, the old boy was good.

Or maybe Fudge was just that pathetic.

Regardless, one should never pass up the opportunity to observe an adversary. There was always something to be learned.

"I know you must be very busy, Minister, so I'll be brief," Dumbledore continued, before Fudge could gather his wits enough to make the claim himself. "I trust your excellent assistant, Mr. Weasley, told you that we suspect that an Archive Folder is malfunctioning, and why we require your assistance. If you consider the circumstances, I think you

will agree that it must be examined immediately," the headmaster stated, blithely ignoring Percy who was making animated gestures to gain Fudge's attention. "To expedite matters, I have brought Hogwarts' resident Charms expert, Professor Flitwick. He should be able to determine if the folder was tampered with, and hopefully set it to rights in short order."

Fudge blinked a couple of times, looking unforgivably confused, in Lucius' opinion. One should never admit ignorance. The minister did redeem himself a bit when he nodded politely to the Charms professor, then excused himself and whirled on a very chagrined-looking Percy Weasley. Lucius smirked behind his hand, and casually moved to a spot where he could lean comfortably against the wall. If the spot allowed him to conveniently "overhear" their hissed conversation, so much the better.

"I thought you said this was a routine matter that was of no great import, Mr. Weasley!"

"I did! It is! My father came in spouting some ridiculous story about how Harry was neglected by his Muggle relatives! I said I would send a team out to investigate but he refused! Clearly, a proper investigation would uncover their lack of proof."

Perhaps, Lucius conceded thoughtfully, or they may simply want to keep their facts out of the "Daily Prophet".

"Perhaps we should move this conversation into your office, Minister," Dumbledore suggested pointedly, silencing the other two wizards. "Professor Flitwick and I will be happy to clear up any misunderstandings and answer any questions," he continued more placatingly.

"Yes, yes, of course," Fudge agreed, before remembering his luncheon date. He stopped and looked indecisively at Malfoy, but Lucius waved a forgiving hand. "Duty calls, Minister. I am content to wait." To prove his claim, he folded his elegant figure into one of the comfortable chairs in the outer office and gave Dumbledore a mocking little nod. "If the headmaster is as efficient as he claims, you

should be done in no time. Perhaps Mr. Weasley here can nip down to the Archive and fetch the folder in question, just to save time."

Cornelius brightened. "An excellent idea!" he enthused. "Run along, Percy, there's a good chap. Thank you, Lucius, we'll try to be brief."

"Take your time, Minister, I'm off for the rest of the day so there's no great need to rush," Malfoy forgave easily, watching in amusement as Weasley huffed out the door as fast as his long legs could carry him, and the other wizards disappeared into Fudge's office. Delores Umbridge, Fudge's other staff member, appeared to be at lunch already which was perfect.

Hurrying over to the door, he cast a small alarm spell that would let him know if anyone was approaching from the hallway, then went over to Weasley's desk. He cast a quick Scourgify on the desk and chair, then keyed on the magical intercom and listened to the arguing voices filtering through the device.

"Minister I still believe it would be prudent--"

"Don't be daft, Albus, there's no need for silencing spells! No one eavesdrops on the Minister's office! Wands are checked at the front for Heaven's sake! Besides there's no one out there but Lucius, so do get on with it."

Lucius rolled his eyes. How did someone so naive ever attain the post of Minister? he wondered, then began listening intently as Dumbledore finally sighed in exasperation, then got down to business.

The Hogwarts professors obviously suspected that their meeting wasn't anywhere near as private as they'd like, and were clearly trying to be cagey. Well acquainted with the futility of such an exercise, Malfoy nearly chuckled out loud when Fudge's native obtuseness neatly thwarted that plan, and forced them to speak more plainly than they probably would have liked. Steepling his fingers in front of him, Lucius raised an inquisitive brow and took note of details that might interest his master.

They suspected Potter's folder had been tampered with?

The alarm system was not functioning properly?

Potter needed to be removed from his Muggle guardian's care, and the sooner the better?

Hmm. Interesting. Very interesting indeed, Malfoy thought, a calculating gleam in his pale gray eyes.

"This should do it for the women's robes, Sparky," Maggie McKnight said, casting pressing and freshening charms on some of the garments she'd just finished re-hanging. "After this, all we have to do is sort through that pile of menswear."

Harry nodded, then raised an eyebrow at the number of robes still waiting to be put away. When he'd arrived, Madam Malkin had directed him over to the fitting area, and requested that he help Maggie sort the mess out. "You must have been busy earlier," he noted, as the witch removed the last few ladies' robes from the wall bar and draped them over his arm.

"Oh, aye," Maggie confirmed, pausing a moment to pocket her wand and stretch her fingers. "It was a very odd sort of morning. Normally we don't have so many customers all at once. They were mostly last-minute shoppers for the Whitworth wedding," she said, giving Harry a sly wink. "Can't be seen wearing last years' robes, don't y'know."

Harry chuckled and rolled his eyes in response, and made his way to the ladies' department. Actually, he thought, methodically hanging the rich formalwear, it's been a rather odd sort of day all the way around.

First, there had been Pigwidgeon's rather ignominious arrival that morning. Frowning, the dark-haired teen made a mental note to check on the little owl again when he returned to the Leaky Cauldron, and maybe pop by Eeylop's Owl Imporium later. Pig's normal hyperactive manner had made his state of near collapse all the more frightening, and Harry was taking no chances. He'd looked in on the bird before leaving for Madam Malkin's, but hadn't really been able to get a clear indication of his health. He'd seemed to be sleeping comfortably, though, so Harry had left him under Hedwig's watchful eye, confident that the snowy owl would fetch him if need be.

Frowning thoughtfully, Harry hung the last of the womenswear then made his way back to where Maggie was working, still working through the events of the morning. Pig's condition had been a shock, but equally disturbing was Hermione's theory that he was somehow blocking tracking magic. He'd fretted about that a bit after reading the letter Pig had brought, but by the time he'd finished cleaning up and writing to Sirius, he'd mostly convinced himself that Hermione, brilliant though she might be, had to be mistaken in this case. Unless his magic was doing something without his knowledge or consent, there was no way he could do what she was suggesting. He wouldn't even know where to start for Heaven's sake!

Or so he'd thought.

Now he was beginning to wonder.

Harry grinned at Maggie as he accepted another armload of freshly pressed robes, ("Not too many now, there's no great rush!") then continued his musings as he trudged towards the men's department.

By the time he'd made his way down to the kitchen to help Tom open for the day, he'd dismissed Hermione's theory as daft, and moved on to more pressing matters like how he was going to smooth Ron's ruffled feathers and if it might be safe to tell his friends what was going on. Deep in thought, he'd greeted Tom, then headed out into the dining room to take the chairs off the tables. He hadn't really taken note of what the older wizard was doing until he came back for place settings and realized Tom hadn't budged an inch.

Curious, he had wandered over to see what was going on, and had found Tom fussing irritably with the tracking charm he'd cast the night Harry had escorted Janet and her girls back to their house. Tom had insisted that the spell was useful as a safety precaution, especially since he was out and about so much, so Harry had grudgingly allowed the older wizard to keep it on the condition that it be kept hidden.

In all honesty, Harry considered the tracking charm something of a nuisance, and hadn't been all that concerned when Tom hadn't been

able to resolve his difficulty with it. He'd taken a much keener interest in the proceedings when Tom informed him that his charmed worklog was malfunctioning as well.

Since Harry found it difficult to recall every stupid little chore he'd done, especially if he was doing a lot of small jobs, Tom had instructed him to keep a list, documenting his work. Neither wizard had particularly liked that, though. Since writing the items down and balancing the account every day was boring and tedious, it hadn't been long before Tom had gone in search of a way to automate it. The result had been a parchment logbook, charmed to track and keep a running tally of Harry's earnings and expenditures while in the Leaky Cauldron. Harry thought it was a dead useful little thing, and had hovered anxiously while Tom tried to sort it out, but both spells appeared to have gone completely haywire. The log had stopped making entries sometime this past Saturday, and instead of giving details about Harry's whereabouts and status, the tracking charm simply read:

Sparky

Location: Unknown

Status: Unknown

"Peculiar," Tom had commented, rubbing his chin with one hand. "Most peculiar," he reiterated after removing the charms and re-casting them to no avail.

Personally, Harry thought "peculiar" didn't even begin to cover it, and considered the oddity as he went back for yet another armload of robes. Could Hermione possibly be right? And if so, how? Fantastic as the notion was, it would explain why Professor Dumbledore hadn't simply sent someone to fetch him. It would also explain Ron's owls' behavior to some extent and Tom's problems with the log-- Eurgh! he interrupted himself when he noticed a particularly revolting set of robes waiting to be returned to the sales floor. I didn't even know Madam Malkin carried this kind of stuff!

"Not the most attractive thing, is it?" Maggie observed, grinning at the look on his face.

Harry blinked at the robe then shook his head in dismay as he took in the current assortment on the hanging bar. A lot of the robes in the pile were all right, but as he and Maggie worked their way towards the bottom, they were coming across some of the gaudiest, most outrageous garments Harry had ever seen. A case in point was the retina-searing orange creation on top of the robes Maggie had just laid across his arm. Harry grimaced, wondering if it glowed in the dark, then inquired, "Did someone go out of their way to find the most dreadful robes in stock?"

It was meant to be a rhetorical question, but Colleen, who had come over to help, looked mischievously at Maggie and laughed as the other witch rolled her eyes. "Something like that," she confirmed, making Harry raise his eyebrows inquisitively.

Grinning impishly, Colleen filled in the back story. "Mags told you about this morning's wedding guest panic, right?" She waited for his nod then continued. "Well, some of the Weasley boys came in looking for dress robes while we were trying to attend to the Whitworth lot. Mags, here, told them to 'feel free to browse' until someone was available help them."

"I didn't know they planned to dismantle the place," Maggie grumbled pettishly, shooting the other witch a harassed look as she hung another robe and inspected it for dirt or wrinkles.

"I know, love, I'm just having you on. They just got a little carried away is all," Colleen said placatingly, before turning to Harry.

"The older brothers were having a bit of fun with the younger one," she said, continuing her explanation. "Since they were paying, they reckoned they should be allowed to choose which garment would be purchased." Plucking at the sleeve on one of the uglier robes, she slanted Harry a knowing look. "Obviously the object of their generosity wasn't impressed with some of their ahem choices."

"Obviously," Harry agreed, laughing helplessly as he imagined the scene. Poor Ron, he thought, smirking at a set of maroon velvet robes with generous lace cuffs and a matching jabot at the throat. His best friend's likely reaction to that was probably something like "no, no, and hell no!" The Weasley twins and his Muggle cousin didn't share many traits in common but Harry had to admit, all three of them were experts at finding weaknesses and exploiting them. Fred and George were not malicious in their teasing, unlike Dudley, but once they had someone going they certainly weren't above milking it for as long as they could.

Prats, Harry thought half in amusement, half in exasperation as he hefted the robes and headed back to the mens department. Thoughts of Ron and his family brought Pigwidgeon to mind again, so Harry found himself speculating idly on tracking magic and messenger owls as he returned the dress robes to their proper places.

The main sticking point that Harry could see with regard to Hermione's theory was Hedwig. Errol and Pig might be having trouble locating him, but she clearly wasn't. It could be argued that she already knew where he was, but Errol and Pig did too! They'd been delivering messages all summer, in point of fact. Why were they suddenly having trouble now?

Frustrated, Harry went back to get the last few robes. Okay. Fine. Ignoring the Hedwig thing for the moment and assuming he was suddenly somehow invisible to any and all forms of tracking magic, how did it happen? And when? Was he controlling it? Could he turn it off?

Wait.

Back up.

When!

If the log is right, I know when this started! Harry realized with a start. When Tom hadn't been able to sort out the log, he'd fetched a quill and ink, and instructed Harry to fill in the blanks while he rushed out to set the tables and finish getting the dining room in order.

That had been a rather large scare, Harry mused, snorting when he encountered a black satin robe with a matching shoulder cape. Both were lavishly embroidered with silver cobwebs, and the cape was held in place by two jeweled spider brooches. Oh, well done. I can't possibly imagine why Ron didn't choose that one! he mused sarcastically. At least it was better than the pink paisley number he'd just put away.

Normally the idea of recalling three days' work would be rather off-putting, but Harry had gotten off fairly light. Really, between being gone or asleep a good deal of the weekend, and spending most of Monday at Lancaster's, there truly hadn't been a lot to report.

By all indications, the log had stopped working early Saturday afternoon. Unfortunately, once completed, the log clearly documented his sudden loss of appetite and he'd had to come clean to Tom about his recent stomach woes, Harry recalled, twisting his mouth to one side in annoyance. Tom had been concerned that he might be coming down with a summer flu, but Harry had shrugged it off, certain he was just suffering from his body's unfortunate reaction to stress.

Or pretty sure, anyway.

Now that he was almost finished putting all the robes away, and had slowed down enough to notice such things, Harry was dismayed to discover he had broken into a light sweat and was huffing a little. Frowning, he hung the last robe then leaned against the clothing rack and took a deep breath. Why was he so bloody tired? It certainly wasn't like Maggie had been overworking him. She'd commented that he looked a little off, and refused to let him take more than five robes at a time, for Heaven's sake!

"Jimmy?"

Mortified, Harry lifted his head and found Madam Malkin studying him rather seriously. "Sorry ma'am," he said, hoping he didn't look as guilty as he felt. "Just...just taking a short break before coming to find you. Maggie and I have finished sorting the robes in the fitting area."

"Yes, well done," the little witch acknowledged absently, making Harry sweat even more when she put her hands on her hips and continued to frown at him. "Are you quite all right, dear?" she finally asked. "You look a bit peaky."

"I'm fine Madam Malkin," he replied automatically, simply relieved that she wasn't angry. And he was. Or better, then he'd been when he'd first awakened, anyway, Harry added silently as he did a quick assessment. His stamina wasn't top notch and his throat was still bothering him a bit, but the annoying nausea was mostly gone. All in all it was nothing he couldn't live with.

The dressmaker didn't look entirely convinced, but didn't press the issue. "All right, dear, but if you need to leave early just let someone know," she said, straightening her customary mauve robes, and showing him to the back room. Once there she seated him at one of the worktables, and fetched several boxes of accessories.

"There now," she said, arranging them in front of him. "Just sort and price those for now. If you feel up to it when you're done, put them out on the shelves. Do you remember where everything goes and how to use the pricing stylus?"

Harry nodded in acknowledgment. "Yes, ma'am."

"All right, then. I'll leave you to it."

Harry smiled, wise to the witch's transparent attempts to get him to rest, but grateful nonetheless. What's going on with me? Am I just out of shape? he wondered inanely. He didn't think it could have happened so quickly, but it had been several days since he'd done any heavy work...maybe the old Muggle saying "use it or lose it" had more merit than he thought.

Shrugging dismissively, Harry reached for the first box which turned out to be full of school ties and started sorting them by House. If being out of shape was the problem, he had an easy solution. Steve had made it clear again, just this morning, that he wouldn't mind helping Harry train up a bit. Before now Harry had still felt a bit timid

about accepting the offer, but clearly he needed to if he couldn't even hang a few robes without breaking a sweat.

Steve, of course brought the rest of the Wrights to mind, making Harry shake his head as he read the bill of lading and set the numbers on Madam Malkin's pricing stylus. Now there's an interesting lot, he thought with a grin. Nutters--that was the only way to describe them. The whole family was bloody mental --but in a good way.

Tom had solved the mystery behind their sudden disappearance that morning, Harry recalled as he began to touch the price tags on the ties with the stylus. The conversation about his loss of appetite had evidently jogged Tom's memory, because in the middle of pacing around and recommending that Harry take a few days off or at least get looked over by a Mediwizard, the older wizard had suddenly stopped short, slapped his forehead and muttered a mild oath.

"Sorry, lad, I was supposed to tell you, but it completely slipped my mind!" he had said, turning to face the rather bewildered young man. "Steve, Janet, and the girls came by while you were sleeping Sunday afternoon. I going to fetch you, but Janet suddenly started acting like she really didn't feel well at all. I told them to run along and I'd make their excuses..." He glanced up at Harry and spread his hands helplessly. "I do apologize for the oversight. I guess I've been more distracted than I thought."

Harry had been surprised and a bit put out initially, but couldn't stay cross for long. He certainly couldn't claim that this was normal behavior. In fact, if Tom hadn't played the "boss" card and directed the other shopkeepers to send requests for Jim's services care of himself at the Leaky Cauldron, Harry's freelance "business" might have never gotten off the ground. The fact that "Jim Patterson" wasn't a real person might have confused some of the postal owls, so the old man's cooperation had been absolutely essential. Harry was responsible for sorting his schedule and sending response owls, of course, but Tom always ensured that he received his requests in a timely manner. This one small slip was actually a testament to how deeply the old man had been affected by their conversation Sunday afternoon and the revelations about Harry's home life.

Sighing, Harry reset the pricing stylus and began to work on the plain black ties worn by unsorted first years. Candidly, he admitted that there were probably a lot of things he could have done differently, or better, but amazingly, Tom didn't seem to be angry with him. In fact, he'd seemed genuinely distressed that his delay might have contributed to Harry's "illness", with his "dithering." Harry had tried to reassure the old man, but by that time the first customers of the day had arrived, and they'd both had other things to attend to.

Harry had tried to keep his mind on things as he smiled at the customers and serviced the tables, but after discovering that Janet was unwell, he'd found himself...not worried exactly, but distracted. Yes, distracted. Distracted and wondering if everything was quite all right. Steve hadn't been in town long--what if he didn't know where the surgery was, or the chemist? What if he was trapped in the house because Janet was incapable of watching the girls? By the end of the breakfast rush, he had decided that a short visit might be in order--just to see if they needed anything. He'd been toying with the idea of taking some pumpkin juice over anyway, and this was the perfect excuse.

Tom had graced him with one of his toothless smiles when Harry had announced his intentions, and asked that two liters of pumpkin juice be added to his account. The bald wizard hadn't said anything aloud, but when he'd returned with a jug full of the requested beverage, he'd also pressed a large package of biscuits into Harry's hands.

"Give her my love as well, lad," he'd said with a wink, ignoring the boy's reddening cheeks and stuttered protests. "Oh, and do try to make it back before the lunchtime customers start queuing up."

Harry hadn't thought there was any danger of that, and assured Tom he would return straightaway, but the old man's words had troubled him as he'd headed down the street. Love was something he felt horribly uncomfortable discussing. He felt completely out of his depth and wasn't even certain he could properly define the emotion! Was it the wistful longing he'd experienced with the Mirror of Erised? Was it the warm feelings he had for his friends or perhaps the sense of kinship and rush of gratitude Sirius' offer of a home had inspired?

Certainly there was a long list of people of which he was fond, but none of those feelings were precisely the same. Was that love, then? Or just varying shades of "like a whole lot"?

By the time he'd arrived at the Wright's home, he'd managed to confuse himself thoroughly, and had decided trying to sort out his feelings was a bloody waste of time. Unfortunately, he'd also made himself a little unsure about his place in the grand scheme of things, and found himself wondering if this had been such a bright idea. The Wrights seemed to like him well enough, but he'd never popped 'round without an express invitation before.

I should have rung first, Harry had thought, giving himself a mental slap as he continued on his way. Unlike most Muggle-raised wizards, he didn't automatically think of ringing when he wanted to contact someone. Because of the Dursleys forbidding him to touch theirs and his growing accustomed to the wizard practice of owling, Harry was actually much more likely to fetch his writing supplies than pick up a phone if he wanted to communicate with someone.

By the time a confused-looking Stephen Wright responded to his knock, Harry had been convinced he was going to be turned away, and was prepared to just ask after Janet, hand over the goods and go. Steve had surprised him, though, greeting him warmly, and waving off his apology for not ringing first. "Can you spare a few minutes, or do you have to rush off? Jannie's told me what a busy schedule you keep, but I'm sure the girls would like a chance to say hello. All of them," he'd emphasized with a wink, not seeming put out at all.

Since the lunch rush wouldn't begin in earnest for another hour or more, Harry had happily accepted the invitation, inquiring after Janet, as Steve ushered him in.

"She's much better today," Steve had assured him with obvious relief. "She's just been trying to do too much, and not taking care of herself. I told her to wait until I got here, damn stubborn woman."

Harry shook his head again, smirking a bit as he recalled the older man's protective fussing. Steve's overall attitude combined with the mostly "normal" condition of house itself had relaxed him more than

words ever could. Bright, bouncy music was coming from the living room speakers, and the "keep quiet" atmosphere he associated with the seriously ill, was not in evidence. Definitely a good sign.

The Wrights had been attending to their laundry when he arrived, and as Harry entered the living room he'd been pleased to note that Steve was quite right. Janet had been seated in the floor with her daughters, folding the last of the shirts, and appeared to have made a complete recovery.

"Hey! Look who's here! Steve had called with a grin, drawing everyone's attention. Becky and Kitty had looked up then smiled brightly and rushed over, latching onto him like they hadn't seen him in a year. Janet had been a little more restrained in her greeting but not by an awful lot. She'd given him a big hug and a kiss on the cheek, beaming when he passed on Tom's message and thanking him very nicely for the juice and biscuits.

The whole thing had been amazing, really. He'd felt very much the intruder when he'd knocked on the door, but within ten minutes he'd been folded into the family routine like he'd lived there all his life. Harry paused a moment in his pricing, snickering when he recalled the Sock War. Even now, he couldn't swear who'd made the first toss. He was almost certain it had been Kitty, but it could have been Janet. She was sneaky that way, sometimes. One minute he'd been sitting on the floor with the rest of the family, sorting socks and enjoying the peppy rock music, and the next minute someone had lobbed a rolled up pair of socks directly at Steve's head.

Harry had blinked in astonishment, not quite known what to think as the socks bounced lightly off the top of Steve's head and rolled to a stop. Certainly Uncle Vernon would have never tolerated that sort of behavior. Heck, Uncle Vernon would have never been sorting socks in the first place! He'd tensed up a bit, wondering what was going to happen next, but Steve had merely cocked an eyebrow and borrowed a line from the old Warner Brothers' cartoons:

"Of course you know, this means war..."

The Wrights did that a lot, Harry noted, picking up the stylus again. It seemed to be a family trait to quote lines from songs or the cinema or shows off the telly. In the early days of their acquaintance, he'd actually found it sort of eerie when Janet and Kitty would say the same thing in response to some random cue, and even more disturbing when the line in question was one that Becky knew as well. Steve was obviously just as bad, and his comment had touched off a total sock free-for-all. Harry initially thought he'd refrain, but changed his mind at once when Kitty bounced a pair of Becky's frilly anklets off his chest. They'd played for a few minutes, tossing the soft projectiles at each other with a great deal of silliness and laughter until a stray shot hit an already-fussy Becky in the ear, frightening her and ending the game.

The visit had gone surprisingly well, but had been over all too soon. The hour or so that had seemed like loads of time when he left the Leaky Cauldron had flown faster than his Firebolt and before he'd known it, Harry had found himself hurrying back to the wizard inn, as fast as his irritable stomach would allow.

There, Harry thought in satisfaction, surveying the priced and sorted ties. He was just debating on whether he should carry on pricing the other accessories or shelve the ties and come back when he was rudely interrupted by a furious shout.

"YOU MORONIC IMBECILE! IS THE CONCEPT OF STEALTH LOST ON YOU? WHAT WERE YOU THINKING? WERE YOU TRYING TO ANNOUNCE OUR PRESENCE TO THE MINISTRY?"

Harry sucked in a startled gasp as the link he had with Voldemort suddenly flared to life. The dark wizard was in a towering rage, over something, Harry noted as he glanced at the door that let into the shop. No one was there. Good. Automatically his fingers flew to his shirt pocket, searching for his pen and notepad as the conversation continued in his head.

"It was a Muggle, Master! Just a Muggle! We didn't visit them or cast the Dark Mark! It was owls! Just a few owls! They left a few warning messages on the front step!" the hapless Death Eater begged, knowing, just as Harry did, what was probably coming.

"Owls that are bringing their messages back undelivered now?" Voldemort spat. "How are these Muggles doing this without the aid of the Ministry?"

"I don't know, Master, but the Ministry isn't involved! It isn't only myself, there are others who feel they don't belong--" he tried to explain, breaking off in an anguished scream when Voldemort snarled "Crucio!"

As the energy from Dark Lord's curse flashed over their link and slammed into his scar Harry clenched his teeth and cast around desperately, trying to keep his own sympathetic howls under control. Damn! The connection usually didn't come to life so quickly! Normally he had some time to prepare!

Harry he noted fleetingly that the Death Eater being "disciplined" sounded vaguely familiar before an especially vicious blast demolished all coherent thought. Panicking slightly, he staggered to his feet, topping his chair in the process. He had to run--break the connection--hide in the loo--something--anything! He couldn't be caught like this! He'd never be able to explain himself. He was considering using a bolt of material to muffle his yell when another voice interrupted.

"Master?"

Whimpering softly in relief, Harry leaned over the table bracing himself with both palms, as Voldemort's attention was distracted and the intensity lessened somewhat. Unfortunately as the pain in his head began to ebb, his ability to hear diminished also. Harry made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat and strained to re-establish the full connection, but his strength was shot. He was able to get some of it, but Voldemort's irritation at being interrupted just didn't fuel the link as effectively.

"...This...etter...be...portant, Malfoy," the red-eyed wizard warned, while his victim moaned piteously in the background.

"Yes, Master." Malfoy was all business from what Harry could hear. His tone was brisk, efficient, and utterly lacking its usual condescending attitude. He almost didn't sound like himself. "Dumble...visit...inisty. ...worried...Potter's folder."

Folder? Harry frowned a bit wondering if he'd misunderstood, but no, the word was "folder." Struggling to hear, he was able to barely make out "advance the timetable" and "press our advantage" before the link slipped like dust through his fingers and scattered into silence.

For several long second he leaned on the table, breathing hard and trying to gather himself. Mr. Malfoy had obviously overheard Professor Dumbledore at the Ministry earlier! he determined woozily he pushed himself upright, and tested his ability to stand unaided. The professor would probably want to know about that straightaway! Hoping Madam Malkin was nearby, Harry stumbled towards the door, planning as he went. First he needed to return to the Leaky Cauldron, then he needed to write to Professor Dumbledore, and then he needed to collapse.

In that order.

Fortunately the little witch had evidently heard his chair hit the floor and came rushing through the door before he'd taken more than a few steps. "Are you all right dear? I heard a crash--oh! Jim! Great Merlin, child, you look like death warmed up!"

Harry closed his eyes and nodded, stopping when it made his head hurt worse. "Sorry, Madam Malkin, but I think I need...t'go," he mumbled, doubly grateful for the headband that hid his scar. Not only was it hiding the lightning shaped mark, it was also keeping sweat from dripping into his eyes.

"Of course dear, of course," Madam Malkin soothed, pressing a gentle hand against his cheek, then wrapping a supportive arm around his back. "Oh, dear, you're all clammy, love," she noted worriedly, as he swallowed with some difficulty. "Can you get back all right? Would you like to use the Floo System? Yes," she decided, steering him towards her cavernous fireplace. "You'll never make it back on foot. Don't worry, love, we'll have you tucked into bed in no

time," she soothed, casually picking up some Floo Powder and urging him forward.

Floo? Oh, no. Nonono. Harry felt himself go green at the thought. He tried to tell the Madam Malkin that Flooing was a really bad idea but his throat was suddenly hurting again making speech really difficult.

Already decided on a course of action, Madam Malkin brushed off his objections, pointing out practically that it was the quickest way to get him where he needed to go, and herding him towards the hearth. Before Harry could figure out a means of escape, she'd dropped the powder, and shouted, "The Leaky Cauldron!"

As the green flames enveloped him, Harry uttered an undignified little whine, and clenched his teeth together, concentrating on making it through the Floo System before he threw up all over himself. Floo rides between the Diagon Alley shops and Lancaster's were usually quite brief, he reminded himself, as his stomach roiled dangerously. He'd just had time to wildly wonder if the Floo System was charmed against motion sickness when the dizzying ride was over and he tumbled out of Tom's hearth, landing in a rather undignified heap.

"All right, dear?"

Swallowing painfully, Harry shifted to face the fireplace, nodded to Madam Malkin's head, and managed a raspy "Thanks."

"Anytime, dear. Do take care of yourself," she said before disappearing with a pop.

The Leaky Cauldron was pretty quiet at the moment, so Harry stayed where he'd fallen for a few seconds, closing his eyes and pressing his feverish cheek against the cool stone floor. Muzzily, he wondered if Tom was going to stuff him back into the fireplace and Floo him off to St. Mungos, when a shout from the bar made his eyes pop open.

"Parky! Mama dere's 'Parky!"

"What?"

Cocking an eyebrow, Harry wearily lifted his head when he heard footsteps approaching.

"Sparky? Are you all right?" Janet asked as Becky dragged her along by the hand. "What happened, baby? Did you trip when you came in the door?"

What? Harry couldn't keep the puzzled look off his face. There was no door in this part of the Leaky Cauldron.

"Hmm. He might have caught that out of order sign on the pay phone," Steve suggested, looking at a perfectly ordinary pillar near the fireplace. "When is that going to be fixed, Tom?"

Phone? Harry wondered for a second if Steve and Janet had gone nutters or he had. There was no door and there certainly wasn't a phone there. Frowning in confusion, he started to ask what the bloody hell they were on about, but subsided when he noticed Tom frantically signaling for him to keep quiet.

Kitty and Becky didn't get the message, however. "Mom," Kitty said tentatively, "where do you see a phone and a door?"

"The door's right there!" Janet declared, pointing at the fireplace. "I don't see a phone though," she claimed, looking around in confusion. "Didn't you tell me the Leaky Cauldron didn't have a phone, Jimmy?" she asked a bit plaintively when the mysterious instrument continued to elude her.

"But there's no door, Mom!" Kitty insisted, growing agitated. "No phone and no door! There's just a big fireplace!"

"If there's no door there then how did Jim get in?" Steve asked, looking as bewildered as his wife and oldest daughter.

Amazingly, Becky was the only one who was calm. "'Parky fell outta da fire pace," she said matter-of-factly, "just like Sanna Caus!" She paused a minute then got a brilliant smile on her face. "'Parky go see Sanna Caus?" she asked, her blue eyes sparkling hopefully.

"Don't be silly, Becky," Steve corrected, as he absently reached down and gave Harry a hand up. "Whoops, easy there," he said, steadying the teen when he wobbled slightly.

Hurt, Becky shook her head. "No! 'Parky fell outta da fire pace!" she insisted, starting to tear up. "Becky saw!"

"Becky," Janet reprimanded a bit more sharply.

"Well he is awful dirty, Mom," Kitty pointed out in her sister's defense. "I didn't see him fall out, but I did see a flash from the fireplace."

"Dirty?" Steve echoed, looking Harry up and down. "Well he might need to brush off a bit from falling down, but I wouldn't call him dirty. "

Harry felt his jaw sag open in surprise. He was literally covered in soot--had gotten it on Steve's hand and shirt for crying out loud! How could he miss it? The fact certainly didn't slip by Kitty.

"But Dad," she objected, "he's got black stuff all over him! You got it on your hand and shirt when you helped him up!"

Harry glanced at Tom, wanting an explanation but not daring to ask for one. By the look on the older man's face some calamity was about to occur, and it wasn't long in coming. As Harry watched nervously, Janet suddenly got a horribly confused look on her face. "She's right. Your hand, Steve. You have soot all over your hand, and Jimmy's covered in it, and there's a huge stone fireplace here and Tom! " she gasped then asked again as though seeking reassurance. "Tom?"

"Yes, dear, it's me," Tom assured her, taking her hand in one of his and grabbing his wand with the other. With a couple of swishes he accio'd a couple of chairs that Steve and Janet sank gratefully into.

"What are you seeing now?" Tom asked gently.

"Fireplace," Janet listed dully, while Steve nodded his agreement. "Door to London, door I never noticed before, bar, dining area...at least that didn't change. Tom, what's going on?" she demanded, more frightened than angry.

Sighing, Tom rubbed a hand over his bald pate. "This is probably going to seem like an odd question, but bear with me. Do you believe in magic?"

Chapter 30: And Now For My Next Trick...
July 25, 1995

Do you believe in magic?

Stephen Wright considered the question as he ushered his family into a parlor off the main taproom. As he waited for Tom and Jim to return, he shook his head bemusedly and marveled at his situation.

Before about five minutes ago, if he'd been asked the same question, he would have said that magic was something he liked to think might exist, but couldn't prove one way or the other.

Now he was having to re-arrange his thinking a little. If magic didn't exist, what the hell just happened?

The reality bending sensation he'd just experienced had been truly indescribable. His perception of Tom and the Leaky Cauldron had been completely turned upside down. When Janet had introduced them a few days ago, Steve had been awed. Tom and the Leaky Cauldron had been the very image of what he'd always imagined a British pub and owner might appear, based on books he'd read and old movies he'd seen. Now...

Now they just weren't. Nothing was, Steve thought as he guided Janet and the girls over to a medallion-backed sofa and solicitously settled them on it. Well, no, that wasn't strictly true. Sparky didn't seem to have changed much, he allowed, craning his neck so that he could see both the main taproom and the luxurious parlor he now found himself in. The contrast was stunning he had to admit, the college professor in him busily dating and cataloging as much of the living history as he could.

"Nice room," Janet commented, speaking for the first time since they'd been able to see the Leaky Cauldron as it truly was. "Is it Victorian?" she asked, running an admiring hand over the seat of the sofa.

"Something like that," he replied with a shrug, taking in his immediate surroundings again. The parlor was much more formal, that was for

sure. Two medallion-backed sofas and a matching chair were grouped together on a rose patterned area rug in front of an ornate fireplace. The furniture was all upholstered in velvet, the sofas green and the chair soft gold. Hand-painted prism lamps sat on occasional tables, with candles and bric-a-brac here and there. It was a very pretty room, if you were interested in that sort of thing, Steve supposed, although it was not his style at all. He much preferred the main dining area with its solid, if rather plain wood tables and chairs and stone floor. The furnishings in here looked like they might collapse if a body simply looked at them wrong.

"Something like that?" Janet arched a brow. "Is that the best you can do, Mr. History Professor?" she teased, laughing when he gave her an annoyed look.

"My specialty is arms and armor. I never claimed to be a furniture expert," he retorted, noticing as he walked back over that Becky had clambered onto Janet's lap and was now laying rather listlessly against her chest. Kitty was sitting between her mother and the arm of the sofa, gripping Janet's arm and looking troubled. "Something wrong?"

"Becky feels a little warm," Janet said, absently carding the fingers of one hand through the baby's dark curls. "Can't say I'm surprised. She's been awfully fussy today."

"Hmm. Jim didn't look too hot either," Steve commented, recalling how weak and unsteady the boy had seemed. "Probably means this one isn't far behind," he theorized, frowning slightly as he reached down to feel Kitty's forehead. "How're you doing, kid?"

The brown-haired girl shrugged, glancing uncertainly between her parents as if she wanted to say something but wasn't quite sure where to start. Before Steve or Janet could try to coax anything out of her, Tom came bustling back in with a little tea cart loaded down with refreshments.

"I sent the boy upstairs to tidy up," the older man informed them as he steered the cart over and took a seat on the other couch. "One method of travel we have is a system of connected fireplaces known

as the Floo Network. Soot always tends to be a problem, but I'm afraid he was a bit damp when he came through just now. Under the circumstances I thought a shower would be best. He shouldn't be long."

Steve nodded and made a noncommittal noise of understanding, while Janet hugged her younger daughter. "I guess Becky was right after all," she said, still sounding a little shell-shocked as she tried to mollify the still-sulking baby with a hug and a kiss. "Sorry sweetheart. I don't know exactly why, but for some reason Mommy and Daddy couldn't see the fireplace until just now," she explained, speaking to Rebecca, but looking meaningfully at Tom.

Steve smiled fondly and reached out, intending to give Janet's shoulder a little squeeze, but stopped when he realized the hand he'd hauled Sparky to his feet with was still smudged with soot. He pivoted to face Tom, meaning to ask where the public washroom was, but the words died in his throat when he noticed the other man now had his wand out and was pointing it in his direction.

He tensed, not knowing exactly what was going to happen next, but all Tom did was flick the slender instrument in his direction with a cheery "Allow me." He didn't quite catch what else the innkeeper said, but in a blink, the soot was gone from his skin and clothing, making him feel rather foolish. Tom frowned critically at his work for a second, then nodded as though satisfied and returned to the other sofa.

"I'm afraid I don't have a lot of experience at this," he began, picking up the teapot and beginning to fill the cups, "but I must say you're all taking this remarkably well."

Steve exchanged a glance with his wife and shrugged. "We had a little warning Sunday morning," he admitted, drawing Kitty's undivided attention. "Jannie and I were planning to talk to the kids over breakfast, but Jim was as jumpy as a cat for some reason, so we let the matter ride. We meant to bring it up that afternoon, when we came back by, but Janet got sick and had to go home, and it really hasn't come up again. I didn't think about it when Jim looked in on us earlier."

"I see," Tom said, setting the teapot aside and filling a couple of glasses with pumpkin juice for Kitty and Becky. When everyone had a beverage, and a plate of tea-cakes was being passed around he studied his guests appraisingly. "I'm sure you have questions you'd like to ask. Do you want to start there, or shall I give you a bit of background first?"

"You start," Janet decided while Steve nodded his agreement and settled on the sofa beside her.

"Very well," Tom said, taking a sip from his teacup and looking up as though wondering where to begin. "Now, as I said before, I'm not as practiced as those who do this as part of their jobs, but I do get a stray Muggleborn or two from time to time," he said, smiling warmly at Kitty and Becky. "As I'm sure you've realized by this time, magic is real. The Leaky Cauldron is one of the bridges or entryways from the non-magical or Muggle world into the magical realm or Wizarding World as it is more commonly known. Beyond the door in the back of the pub is a street called Diagon Alley..."

While Tom began to try to explain magic, upstairs a freshly showered and dressed Harry Potter dropped into his desk chair and dug out his little stack of Order parchment. "How do I get myself into these things?" he grumbled peevishly, wincing as his throat reminded him that speaking aloud probably wasn't a good idea just now. And why did this have to happen today?

Mindful of the people waiting downstairs Harry applied himself to his task with a single minded enthusiasm that would have made Hermione proud. Unfortunately, he was thwarted somewhat in his efforts by how miserable he currently felt. His head ached, his scar was still burning on his forehead, his throat hurt, his stomach was acting stupid again, little things seemed to take an inordinate amount of energy, and his eyes felt dry and scratchy.

Flipping hastily through his notepad, Harry scanned the information he'd jotted down at Madam Malkin's and wondered briefly if Tom was right and this was some summer flu, or if it was some weird residual effect from his scar flaring up, before deciding he really didn't care. Bed was sounding terribly attractive at the moment, and all he really

wanted to do was crawl under the blankets and sleep until he felt better.

Unfortunately that wasn't an option just now. First he had to finish his correspondence, then he had to weather Steve and Janet's reaction to magic in general, their magical children in particular, and the fact the he, Harry, hadn't been completely straight with them.

Sighing, Harry selected a quill and dipped it in his ink bottle. That's certainly going to be a cheery meeting, he grumbled, cringing when he recalled Janet's run in with the Daily Prophet photographer. When he'd left them, the elder Wrights had still been rather overwhelmed, but that wouldn't last forever. They'd shake off their shock eventually, and once they did Harry reckoned they'd want answers. Now.

I wonder if the condemned man gets a blindfold and one last butterbeer, he mused darkly as he began to write.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I "overheard" Mr. Malfoy talking to Voldemort no more than half an hour ago. He appeared to have eavesdropped on you when you were discussing a "folder" of mine earlier today. I didn't catch the details, but I suppose you know where you were and who you were talking to.

Pausing a moment to collect his thoughts, Harry raked a hand through his still damp hair, and smiled as he recalled how Tom had taken command like a general mustering troops. Seeming to understand everyone's need to sort themselves out before trying to have a serious discussion, the older wizard had chivvied the Wrights into one of the private parlors, shooed Harry upstairs to have a good scrub, and put the kettle on for tea.

All in the space of three minutes or less.

Even now he wasn't sure how Tom had assessed the situation and taken action so quickly. Was it a lucky guess? Years in the business? Some higher instinct? Shrugging, Harry decided he was grateful whatever the reason. Besides being able to regroup and brace himself, dashing up to his room had given him an opportunity to write

to Professor Dumbledore without having to delay or make excuses. Taking a quick shower had also relaxed him a bit and given his morale a much needed boost. Perhaps that was why Tom hadn't simply tidied him up with a few cleansing and freshening charms.

Well, the good news is I can't get in much worse trouble, Harry mused grimly. I'm dead. I am so bloody dead, he fretted, before forcing himself to concentrate on the parchment once more.

Voldemort seemed quite interested in the folder news, just so you know. I started to lose the connection shortly after that but I was able to catch "upping the timetable" and "pressing our advantage" before I lost the link completely.

Hmm. Harry tapped his quill against his cheek, and ran down his mental list as he surveyed the note. Had he forgotten anything? I think that's all...oh! Wait! he thought with a jolt, remembering what had triggered this episode in the first place. It seemed like a useless bit of trivia, since he had already passed on the news about Mr. Malfoy, but the headmaster had instructed him to pass along any information he could remember, no matter how small. Shrugging, he found the page in his notepad and re-read, just to make sure he recalled correctly, and then started to write again.

One last thing. The link became active because Voldemort was angry at one of his Death Eaters. I couldn't place the voice, but this person had apparently been owling Muggles. The owls are returning with their messages undelivered now, so Voldemort reckons the Ministry must be involved. Are they? Does someone finally believe what happened?

Even as he wrote the question, Harry reckoned the answer was probably "no." Still, stranger things had happened. The Minister could have stopped being a gormless prat...

Yeah, and the sky could turn green tomorrow, too, Harry mused cynically, rolling his eyes in disgust. Fudge would probably deny Voldemort's rebirth even if the slimy git and his entire entourage of Death Eaters marched into the Ministry of Magic, erected a Maypole, and proceeded to dance around it.

He mulled things over for a second, trying to remember if there was anything else, then shrugged and started wrapping up.

That's all I have, sir. Don't want to be rude, but I'm in a bit of a rush. I hope this information is useful to you, he said, pausing to stroke Hedwig when she glided over and landed on the desk.

Yours Sincerely,

Harry Potter

There. Harry had to admit it wasn't the best letter he'd ever written, but it would have to do. All the pertinent facts were there, and frankly, he had more pressing issues at the moment...tracking magic, receiving owls, and the Wrights' reaction to the Wizarding World among others.

He raised his quill to tap the Phoenix icon, then paused. If Voldemort was correct and the Ministry was helping those Muggles, perhaps the same kind of thing was behind his own owl difficulties. It could be coincidence of course, Harry allowed, or Dobby might just be trying to "help" him again, or any one of a million things, but that made more sense than him suddenly being able to block tracking magic. He hesitated uncertainly for a moment, then shrugged and scribbled a hasty postscript before tapping the Phoenix icon.

P.S. I seem to be having difficulty receiving owls as well. Do you know anything about that? And if you don't mind me asking, sir, what "folder" were you referring to? Thanks in advance.

HP

When all traces of his note were gone, Hedwig screeched in a very unladylike manner, and pecked irritably at the parchment. "Hey! Stop that," Harry admonished, picking up the enchanted pages, and putting them away before she rendered them unusable. He'd actually thought Hedwig might enjoy a break from letter delivering, but clearly he was mistaken. She actually seemed to look upon the Order parchment as a rival of sorts, and bitterly resented his use of it.

"I'll answer Ron and Hermione's letter this evening, then you can take it to them, all right?" he bargained, conveniently omitting the fact that he had been planning to just send a short reply back with Pigwidgeon. He looked around, intending to check on Pig and send him on his way if he was fit enough to travel, but the little owl was nowhere in sight.

"Did Pig go back to the Burrow?" he asked, relaxing as Hedwig looked toward the open window and hooted in a way that sounded affirmative. If Pig had tried something stupid she probably would have just snatched him up in her talon again. Might have even sat on him if she was annoyed enough, Harry thought with a smirk. Size did have its advantages, as his git of a cousin had taught him.

Then again, so did speed.

Now that his letter-writing was finished, the angry confrontation waiting downstairs loomed dauntingly in his imagination. And this was just a precursor of things to come, too. He couldn't avoid Sirius and Professor Dumbledore forever. Not if he wanted to return to school at any rate.

Wondering if it was too late to just chuck everything in his trunk and run, Harry frowned moodily and wandered over to the window that looked out on Muggle London. Maybe he could jump without hurting himself, or else balance his trunk on his Firebolt long enough to lower himself to the ground.

Hey! Wait! That's not half bad! Harry thought, perking up as his imagination seized the idea and started running with it. I could wrap up in my Invisibility Cloak! I might even be able to walk out the door. I think it's big enough to hide me and my trunk if I stoop a little. And since Tom's tracking spell is on the blink no one will know! Excellent! he enthused, walking over to the dresser. I can pack up, make my way out and...

and then...

and then what?

Uttering a frustrated little growl, Harry slammed both fists onto the top of the dresser then pressed his forehead against them as his racing mind came to a screeching halt. What was he thinking? Besides being cowardly and rude in the extreme, it was far too late to run. Even if he had somewhere to go, he'd created too public of a persona to simply vanish.

Diagon Alley wasn't that big. People would notice if "Sparky" suddenly went missing, and there was every reason to believe they'd converge on Tom demanding answers.

Some halfwit from the Daily Prophet might even try to stir up a scandal.

Sighing, Harry closed his eyes a moment, regretfully abandoning his plans of flight. Before last year he would have thought Tom impervious to that kind of nonsense, but now he wasn't so sure. Anyway, it wasn't worth the risk. He couldn't--wouldn't--do that to Tom.

"I had the right of it in the beginning," he grumbled to himself, wondering how he could have been so stupid. "I should have stuck to working nights."

"Whatever for? You would have missed out on quite a bit of fun, don't you think?" an unexpected voice asked, making Harry jerk his head up and suck in a startled breath.

"Don't do that!" he exclaimed, then grimaced, and wobbled dizzily. When he got his feet back under him again, he glared at Crystal who had appeared in his mirror. "Are you trying to give me a bloody heart attack?" he continued, speaking at a lower volume, but with the same amount of heat.

"Erm, Tom asked me to check on you," the little being said contritely, knotting her fingers as she spoke. "He and the family waiting downstairs were wondering if you were all right," she reported, making Harry glance guiltily at the clock. Luckily it hadn't been all that long, but he'd had ample time to shower and change.

"Sorry," he mumbled, raking a hand through his hair again before glancing up at Crystal. "I must have lost track."

Crystal hummed in a noncommittal way while looking him up and down. "Well if you don't mind me saying so, you look like a long stretch of bad road," she observed candidly, taking in his pale face and fever-bright eyes. "Shall I pop back down and tell Tom you're ill?"

"Yes. No. Oh, I don't know!" Harry groaned before the first part of her statement registered. "Wait, did you say they were wondering if I was all right?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, I believe I did. The father claimed you were a little unsteady on your feet. He and the mother wanted someone to make sure you were getting along all right. Besides, Tom were expecting you back ages ago. He was carrying on about how quick you usually are."

"They aren't angry?" Harry pressed, frowning in confusion. "Not at all?"

"They didn't appear to be. Worried, more like." She faded out for a second then reappeared, nodding decisively. "Yes. The family is concerned, but not really upset," she reported. "Shall I tell them you won't be down?"

"No, I should go. Just...just give me a minute, will you?" Harry said distractedly as he digested this new information. Crystal had no reason to lie. If she said no one was upset he was probably safe believing her, but the situation made no sense! Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would have been screaming for his blood and carrying on about how thoughtless and ungrateful he was if he'd ever dared to keep them waiting like this!

Pfft. Don't flatter yourself, Potter, they would have already left by now, Harry admitted ruefully, too tired to keep the sadness from showing in his face.

Crystal moved closer to the glass and placed her palm against it. "What is it love? What are you afraid of?" she asked, smiling knowingly behind her other hand when Harry rounded on her again.

"I am not afraid, thank you ever so bloody much," he declared hotly. "What makes you think I'm afraid?"

"Oh, nothing special," Crystal returned dryly, starting to count points off on her fingers. "You're delaying going downstairs for some reason, you're unusually nervous and definitely not yourself, you seem afraid of people who legitimately care about you, and you're biting my head off every five minutes." She crossed her arms and treated Harry to a rather impressive glare of her own. "I realize you're not well, but could we at least converse in a civilized manner?"

Brought up short, Harry stared at her for a second, then bowed his head and muttered another chastised "Sorry."

"Well at least you're not thick enough to try and deny it," Crystal congratulated him, putting her palm against the glass again. Harry had lived at the Leaky Cauldron long enough to know that this was how the Mirror Folk reached out to someone, but the gesture always gave him the shivers. It looked like she was trapped in the glass.

"I'm just worried that there's going to be a big row when the Wrights learn about magic...and me," he finally admitted. "I've been sort of misleading them about who I really am."

"Well I'm not an expert in such things, but they seem to be taking the magic news quite well, although I don't think the full implications have sunk in yet," the little being said with a shrug. "About the other, seems to me that you have good reasons for hiding. Are they so judgmental that they'd jump to conclusions without letting you explain?"

Harry shrugged. "That's what my aunt and uncle always did."

"I see. So the family downstairs reminds you of your relatives?" Crystal questioned sympathetically, making Harry look up in surprise.

"Who, Janet and Steve? Like the Dursleys? " he echoed incredulously. "Oh, no. Chalk and cheese," he hastened to correct her. "The Wrights are nothing like my aunt and uncle," he

emphasized before stopping short and blinking in surprise at what he'd just said.

'The Wrights are nothing like the Dursleys.' Oh, good show. Well spotted, Captain Obvious. How did that escape your oh-so-brilliant notice? Harry wondered, feeling quite disgusted with himself. While he couldn't deny that Steve and Janet would probably be cross with him, at least initially, their previous behavior seemed to indicate that they'd at least listen to what he had to say.

Janet had never been anything but nice to him, and his dealings with Steve, though limited, had all been positive, Harry admitted with a guilty squirm. They hadn't automatically blamed him when they'd found Becky crying, and just today the entire family had welcomed him wholeheartedly and gone out of their way to make him feel at home.

So why, given the evidence, was he so eager to think the worst of them?

It was actually a bit rich of him, Harry realized uncomfortably, especially since Janet had put more faith and trust in him than anyone ever had before. Besides looking to him for help with the local terms and phrases she found unfamiliar, she'd left him alone in her home and entrusted her children to his care.

By contrast, his Muggle relatives had always made it quite plain that they would never hold him in high esteem, and the Wizarding World's capricious fickleness with regard to their supposedly beloved "Boy Who Lived" was just as hurtful if not more so.

The fact that most magical folk were still unwilling acknowledge or even look into Voldemort's return set Harry's teeth on edge--especially since they were more than willing to take the Daily Prophet's gossipy rubbish to heart.

It made it hard to know who he could trust, it made it hard to trust, Harry admitted, wearily rubbing his temples. He'd learned that lesson as a First Year--the difference between "friend" and "fan." Everyone loved him until he messed up, then he was public enemy number one.

It was far easier--and safer--to expect the worst, hold people at arm's length and not let them get too close.

Ah, but you let your guard slip this summer didn't you? his conscience sneered cynically. Harry could almost imagine it leaning against a wall and smirking down at him in a superior fashion. You opened up to those Muggles, allowed yourself to care, and now you're terrified that they're going to hurt you. Pathetic.

Remembering Crystal's words from a few minutes ago, Harry grudgingly admitted there might be a tiny grain of truth in the accusation. If he was as unaffected as he claimed, why had he not cleaned up, written his note, and gone downstairs straightaway? Was he projecting his relatives' fearful prejudice on the Wrights, or perhaps expecting them to suddenly turn on him like his classmates and the Magical community at large had in the past?

Stunned, Harry felt himself start to blush as the truth of the matter hit him. How could he even consider judging them without giving them at least one chance? Hadn't he always hated it when his Muggle relatives had treated him in such a manner?

"Sparky?"

Oh. Oops. Harry looked up and found Crystal studying him seriously.

"Back with us now? You were off with the pixies there for a moment," she commented, still studying him closely. "Are you quite certain you're all right? You look a little flushed."

Harry nodded. "I'm fine. Sorry," he said, managing a small smile for the worried being.

Crystal didn't seem completely convinced, but chose not to push the issue. Instead, she studied him consideringly for another few seconds, then motioned him closer. "Look, technically I'm not supposed to do this, but if it will help ease your mind, I'll give you a little peek downstairs," she offered, opening a circular window of sorts in the center of the mirror. "Then you can see for yourself that you have nothing to worry about."

By now Harry had already half decided that he was being stupid and things would probably be all right. He started to refuse, but the words froze in his throat when the image resolved itself and he caught sight of Katrina's miserable, tear-streaked face. Oh, brilliant, Potter, you forgot about Kitty! he chastised himself. Clearly something had gone seriously wrong while he'd been dawdling upstairs.

Well he wouldn't stand for it! If Steve and Janet want someone to yell at, they can bloody well yell at me! he thought fiercely, conveniently ignoring the fact that he'd been almost beside himself with nerves less than two minutes ago in anticipation of that very event. Automatically he turned, intending to bolt out the door and race to her defense, but paused, confused, when he heard Janet's voice.

"You silly little goose," she said in a voice that didn't sound at all angry, further confusing Harry when she pulled her older daughter into a warm hug. "That's what this was all about? A lamp? "

Kitty nodded into her mother's neck. "I didn't want you to know I was still scared. I wanted you to stay proud of me," she confessed in a very small voice.

"We are proud of you," Steve assured from her other side.

"And my ball?" Kitty asked, looking between her parents.

"And your ball," Janet said with a smile, rubbing soothing circles on the girl's back. "It's all right sweetheart. I'm sorry we misunderstood each other, but just so you know, you're our daughter and we love you no matter what."

"Becky too?" Rebecca asked from her father's arms, making both her parents chuckle.

"Of course you too," Janet said, shaking her head fondly, then glancing over to one side and frowning lightly. "Tom, I really think someone needs to check on Sparky."

Tom, Harry noticed, was looking a little concerned as well. "You might be right at that," the bald wizard stated, putting his teacup down and starting to rise from his seat.

Harry met Crystal's gaze in the mirror as she closed the window. "Would you please tell them I'll be right down?", he requested, turning and heading for the door again.

It took Harry another couple of minutes to screw his courage to the sticking point and make his way downstairs, but go he eventually did. On the way, he flip flopped between cautious hope and resigned despair, feeling very much like he did his second year when he'd had to explain the flying car, and his actions with regard to the Basilisk.

Pausing in the doorway that led from the kitchen into the dining room, Harry habitually glanced around, making sure no one was waiting to be attended to. Customers would have served as another "legal" delaying tactic, but he couldn't say he was surprised when he found the place empty. Early afternoon between lunch and teatime tended to be rather slow. In fact, when he wasn't helping another shopkeeper out on Diagon Alley, this was when he and Tom generally attended to the Leaky Cauldron's guest rooms. Speaking of Tom...

Harry glanced around again, but the other wizard didn't seem to be about. Now that he was nearing the parlor, Harry could hear voices issuing from within. He couldn't make out what they were saying yet, but at least the Wrights were still here. Nervous all over again, Harry dearly hoped that Tom was still inside and not upstairs attending other business, before stopping in his tracks and giving himself a firm shake.

What the bloody hell is wrong with you? 'Oh, I hope Tom is still there,' indeed! It's Janet, not the bloody Inquisition! Just get on with it! he railed angrily, bristling even more when a half-forgotten taunt from Muggle Primary School swam up from the murkier recesses of his memory. "Poor Pathetic Puny Potter, takes his bath in a cup of water..."

Uttering a frustrated little growl, Harry shook his head irritably, then blinked in surprise when the schoolyard teasing melted away but the phantom laughter did not. Coming completely back to reality, it soon

occurred to him that the laughing was coming from the parlor. It quieted down after a minute, then Harry heard Kitty say, "That's not all. Watch! Pink!"

"Boo!" Becky countered.

"Pink!"

"Boo!"

What the heck? Harry wondered, peeking cautiously around the doorframe, to survey the scene.

Tom, who was looking proud enough to pop, was seated on one sofa, while Steve and Janet occupied the other. Kitty was standing in front of her parents, and Becky was perched on her father's lap. From what Harry could see they were showing off their favorite game, and the pink vs. boo, errrr, blue "argument" revolved around the color of the ball.

Harry watched in amusement, frowning distractedly when the colors tickled a memory. There was something familiar about--oh, yes! Sleeping Beauty! No, wait, "Seeping Booty" he corrected himself, chuckling softly at Becky's mangled pronunciation.

After a few more repetitions of "Blue! Pink!" Janet finally spoke. "I always thought that movie should have ended with Fauna turning the dress green and shoving the other two out before they had a chance to object," she commented, with a little half smile, confirming Harry's suspicions.

Steve chuckled appreciatively. "Yeah, that would have been good," he agreed, glancing up and catching Harry's eye. Still half-expecting some sort of scathing reprimand, Harry stood a little straighter and tensed involuntarily. He didn't quite know what to do with himself when Steve merely quirked a teasing eyebrow and poked his wife to get her attention.

"Look who's finally made it. What happened, Jim? Get caught in traffic?"

Squaring his shoulders, Harry responded with a rather sick smile, and forced himself to take a few steps into the room. Okay, this is it, he counseled himself, taking a deep breath and gripping the mantel for support. On the way down he'd decided to come clean to the Wrights--well as much as was safe, anyway. He'd been feeling bad about misleading them, and more importantly, they needed to know the risks involved in associating with him--just in case his cover was blown. If that meant they ordered him out of their lives, so be it.

This had all sounded perfectly reasonable and logical up in his room, but now that he was here facing five concerned stares, the words seemed to pile up like a logjam in his throat. All right, Harry thought, okay. Come on, Potter. You can do this. They were giving him more of a chance than he'd dared to hope for. No one was angry, no one was pushing. All he had to do was say a few measly words and it would all be over. So what are you delaying for? he grumbled, noting irritably that there was never a Basilisk around when you really needed one.

"I...I have to tell you something," he finally managed, wincing at the roughness of his voice, but determined to get it out before he lost his nerve, "and I don't expect you'll like it much."

Husband and wife exchanged a bewildered look, before glancing at Tom, who spread his hands helplessly. Even Kitty and Becky seemed shocked, watching Harry with eyes as big as saucers.

"Um, Tom told us a little about the Wizarding World and the Ministry of Magic, while you were upstairs," Janet finally offered, surprisingly sensitive to his distress when Harry couldn't find the words to start. "He also explained how you weren't sure what you were allowed tell us and how worried you'd been. Is that what you're upset about?"

"Partly," Harry allowed, studying them warily. "You're not too angry, then?" he asked hopefully.

"I think we might be able to overlook that one just this once," Steve said dryly putting an arm around his wife's shoulders. "I was in the

Army, remember? Jannie and I know all about organizations who threaten dire consequences if a person doesn't follow orders."

"It's okay, Sparky," Kitty added earnestly. "I told you Mom and Dad would think magic was cool."

Yes, you did, Harry acknowledged, dredging up a nod and a wan smile for the little girl. He supposed he'd known all along that magic wouldn't be the real issue. Unfortunately, he didn't reckon the Wrights would be as calm and accepting when the topic changed to nutter evil wizards bent on world domination.

"I..." he tried again, stopping with a mortified grimace when his voice cracked under the stress. Redoubling his hold on the mantel shelf, Harry cleared his throat and squeezed his eyes shut for a second trying to get his wits together. When he heard footsteps he glanced up and discovered Janet had abandoned her seat, and was walking purposefully toward him. He watched tensely as she approached, reckoning she'd had enough and was either going to smack him or tell him to get on with it already, but to his surprise the dark haired woman did neither. He was further bewildered when he was taken gently but firmly by the arm.

"You need to sit down, sweetie. You're white as a sheet," Janet informed him worriedly, urging him over to the sofas where Tom was filling the last cup with strong, sweet tea. "Warm, too," she fretted, laying the back of her hand against his cheek as Tom slid the cup across the table. "Sparks, I think you're warmer than Becky. Maybe this should wait until you're feeling better."

"No," Harry argued, shaking his head. There was no way he was going to do this again. "I'm fine, really," he assured, trying to sound firm. Unfortunately the croakiness in his voice wasn't fooling anyone. Even Tom's steaming tea wasn't enough to get him talking properly. He wondered briefly if he should just leave well enough alone, but quickly dismissed the thought. Being around him was a risk, and the Wrights had Kitty and Becky to think of.

"The second bit is...harder," he finally said, glancing uncertainly between Steve and Janet. "I...well...what I mean is...if...if you don't

want to see me again afterwards, I understand," he told them, not realizing he was about to touch off a minor explosion.

"What? Not see you again? Why?" Kitty and Janet demanded in horror, while Becky clung to his arm and wailed, "Want 'Parky! Want 'Parky stay forever!"

Brilliant, Potter. That went well, Harry berated himself as he frantically tried to calm the stricken children, and answer Janet's frightened questions. Clearly he shouldn't have put it quite like that. He raked a frustrated hand through his hair, trying to figure out how to fix his blunder, but Steve and Tom came to his rescue. The former whistled shrilly, while the latter shot several firecrackers out of the tip of his wand making everyone look up in surprise.

"Thank you," Steve acknowledged, exchanging a nod with the old wizard while Harry fidgeted nervously in the sudden silence. He squirmed even more when the Mr. Wright stood and regarded him very seriously. "Either you're more prone to adolescent melodrama than I thought, or there's something seriously wrong here," Steve commented, giving Harry a very piercing look. "So exactly what is it you've done that you think is so unforgivable?"

Rallying when confronted with a direct question, Harry raised his head and met the other man's gaze without flinching. "I've misrepresented my circumstances to you," he said quietly, rather proud of how calm and steady his voice sounded.

"Oh, you mean like the fact that you're living at the Leaky Cauldron and not with your aunt and uncle?" Janet asked from beside him, completely derailing his newfound poise. When he swung around to stare at her incredulously, she just laughed shook her head.

"I hate to burst your bubble, but people over twenty-one still have a few functioning brain cells," she chided, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "It's obvious, isn't it? No matter what time of the day or night I come by you're here or in the immediate vicinity, and Tom just sent you up to your room to bathe and change."

"Oh," was all Harry could think to say, studying her a little anxiously.

"I considered calling Child Protective Services if that's what you're worried about," Janet continued, again seeming eerily attuned to his concerns, "but...well...it--it just didn't seem like the right thing to do," she stumbled, suddenly less confident. She met Harry's eyes almost shyly, then visibly gathered herself and plunged on.

"I've learned to trust my instincts when they're that clear, because every time I haven't, I've regretted it. Besides, you seemed okay, and Tom appeared to be looking out for you, so I just took to stopping by so I could keep an eye on things myself."

Stunned, Harry blinked at her. "But the pumpkin juice!" he blurted, indicating the small, waiting-to-be-filled pitcher that was sticking up out of Becky's diaper bag. "You always came by for pumpkin juice!"

"Yes, well, I do have larger containers you know," she pointed out, grinning impishly. "You were making sarcastic observations about the iced tea in one of them a few days ago."

Harry's answering laugh was a breathy little gust of pure irony. Janet had always been so matter of fact, he'd never noticed, or even suspected ulterior motives. He'd just reckoned that was her favorite juice pitcher or maybe more would be too much for her to carry comfortably. Bloody hell, the whole thing was positively Slytherin!

Across from them Tom chuckled appreciatively. "Oh, you are a naughty one," he scolded Janet, grinning broadly all the while.

Surprisingly, given his nature, the only one who didn't join in the merriment was Steve. When Harry noted the discrepancy and glanced up at Steve again he found himself still being carefully studied. Mr. Wright's gaze was more thoughtful and less stern than before, however, so Harry took that as a good sign. "What is it?" he asked nervously, feeling rather like a bug under glass.

"Well when you started babbling about us not liking you anymore I thought you might be about to 'fess up to playing some mean tricks on Janet," Steve replied. "You know, like you gave in to peer pressure or something."

Shocked, by the indirect accusation, Harry quickly shook his head. "No, never!" He tried to think of something else to say but Steve waved him off, shrugging apologetically.

"I didn't think so. You seem to have more backbone than that," he admitted with a sigh. "Although in some ways I almost wish you had. At least then I'd have a better idea of what's going on." Shifting his focus slightly, Steve included Tom in his address. "We actually had a mission besides pumpkin juice this visit," he said, seriously. Harry watched curiously as he rummaged around in his coat pocket, finally coming up with a folded piece of paper.

No, wait, Harry realized with a blink. It was a folded piece of parchment. In fact, it looked disturbingly like common owl post stationary.

"Someone's been sending Jannie...well, let's just say they aren't invitations to tea," Steve was saying as he held up the letter. "The short story is, Janet found several of these on the front step last week--"

Catching on, Janet looked up from re-tying Becky's shoe. "Steve!" she groaned in exasperation. "I can't believe you brought that thing here. Tom and Sparky aren't responsible! Besides, it's been days since that one came!"

"What is it?" Harry blurted before he could stop himself, but Janet just shook her head.

"It's nothing," she insisted, setting Becky on the couch by her sister. "Just someone being a jerk!"

"You may be right, but there's no harm in making sure, is there?" Steve pointed out. "Come on, aren't I allowed to worry about you? If you're right and this is just some idiotic prank, or maybe one of the locals being an ass, that's one thing. If it's more serious, we need to know. I just thought Tom or Jim might be able to give us some information. I'm certainly not accusing them of anything."

Relenting, Janet sighed. "Fine, but get your facts straight. There were three letters, total. You made it sound like there were more."

"Okay," Steve said, picking up his story without missing a beat. "Janet found three of these on the front step last week," he corrected himself, while Janet nodded.

"I got one a day for three days, and then they just stopped," she said with a shrug. "There was no postmark and no address. Just my name and 'London'."

"If I had to guess, I'd say someone sent you an owl," Tom theorized, echoing Harry's suspicions. He chuckled warmly at Steve and Janet's blank faces, and obligingly sketched out the basics of the wizard postal system for them.

When he finished, Steve looked a little happier. "So there's a chance the sender may not know our house's physical address?" he asked hopefully, relaxing visibly at Tom's verifying nod. "Well that's something, anyway. I was afraid they, whoever they were, were just walking up to the house and tossing them on the porch. Not a very comforting thought."

"I rather doubt it," Tom said reassuringly. "Post owls are very good at what they do. May I?"

"What? Oh, sure. Sorry," Steve said, passing the letter over. Curious, Harry watched as he unfolded the letter and glanced at the note, frowning uneasily when his boss's face darkened like a thundercloud.

"Rubbish!" Tom scoffed angrily. "Absolute codswallop!"

"Yeah, that's about the size of it," Steve replied dryly. "What about you, Jim? Does this mean anything to you?"

Surprised and pleased at his inclusion, Harry leaned forward and accepted the page from Tom. The note was very short, so it didn't take long for him to discover what everyone was upset about.

Begone, Muggle, and take your brats with you.

The Leaky Cauldron's too good for your kind!

"Prats," he muttered, shaking his head in disgust at the "your kind" reference.

"Yeah, I know, it doesn't make sense," Janet commented. "At first I thought it might be some kind of 'Yankee Go Home' thing, but all the people I've met have either been friendly or indifferent."

"Could it possibly be fear talking?" Steve wondered. "You said the magical community keeps itself hidden, and 'Muggle' means people like us, right? Well, like Janet and me, anyway," he amended, smiling proudly at his daughters. "Do you think this person simply sees Jannie as a security risk?"

Tom frowned, considering. "It's possible," he admitted, "but I get Muggles in here from time to time. The most common lot are Muggleborns like Kitty and Becky here, but occasionally a Muggle without a speck of discernable magic will wander in. It's been a problem since Daisy Dodderidge built the place almost five hundred years ago.

"To get around the problem without posting a guard, some clever soul built a secondary defense," Tom continued. "The mechanics of the spells are rather complex, but essentially what occurs is any person entering the Leaky Cauldron sees what they expect to see. Witches and wizards expect to see the Leaky Cauldron, so they do. Most Muggles at least perceive it as a pub, but not always. One old dear who was a regular before she passed away was convinced this was a very fine tearoom.

"I was actually quite happy when Sparky told me your children were magical. The odds of the two of you perceiving the pub in the same way were next to nothing so it was just a matter of time before the inner defense was breached. As you found out today, the second a person doubts what they're seeing, the illusion crumbles."

"What do the kids have to do with it?" Janet asked.

Tom looked uncomfortable. "They will be offered magical training at some point, either through the British or American school system--possibly both. In other words, you just found out about magic a little earlier than you might have otherwise. As the parents of magical children you have the right to know, and I'm sure you can see it's in your family's best interest to keep the secret. If the girls had been Muggle as well the Ministry would have stepped in and things could have gotten...more complex."

"Sounds like there's some tension with regard to 'Muggles'," Steve commented shrewdly.

"Yes," Tom admitted with a sad sigh. "The magical community isolated itself hundreds of years ago, and a lot of the old families still cling to the belief that Muggles shouldn't be tolerated for any reason. Some even claim 'Muggleborns' are somehow inferior to 'Purebloods' which is rubbish, of course. Children all have their strengths and weaknesses regardless of heritage, and no one, not even our top researchers have been able to fully explain why some humans can perform magic and others cannot."

"Do you think it could be genetic?" Janet asked, intrigued in spite of herself. "Like Steve and I are carriers or something?"

"That's possible. It's also possible that they weren't singled out for schooling for some reason or another, or perhaps their parents couldn't or wouldn't allow them to attend."

Becky by this time was drowsing, but Kitty was still keeping up with the conversation. "Mom?" she asked finally, "Dad? Would you like to try my ball? Sparky could make it change color. Maybe you can, too."

Tom beamed at her. "Excellent! Mind if I have a go?" he asked, smiling as she shook her head and held out a ball.

"Just think of a color," she instructed, glancing over at Harry for support. "Right Sparky?"

Harry nodded. "That's right," he agreed, smiling with everyone else when Tom turned his ball lemon yellow. Steve seemed

uncharacteristically hesitant when Kitty moved in front of him, so he Harry reached over and turned the ball red. "There's nothing to it," he encouraged quietly.

"Sparky!" Kitty scolded, giving him a little shove before turning back to her father. "Here, Dad," she said sweetly, snuffing the red ball and creating a fresh one.

"No pressure," Steve grumbled lightly, noting how closely he was being watched. Gingerly he reached out and took to the ball his daughter was holding out, balancing it on the palm of one hand.

"Try blue," Janet suggested when nothing noticeable happened.

"I am trying blue," he returned, frowning at the ball like it was being difficult on purpose.

"Oh." Janet watched quietly for a minute then offered, "I think it turned a little bit."

"Nah," Steve disagreed, trying not to be disappointed. Ah, well."

"I think it did a little, Dad," Kitty said, holding up a fresh white ball for comparison. Sure enough, there was a faint tinge of blue, but it was nowhere near the deep, rich shade Steve had been envisioning. Kitty gave her dad a hug and assured him she still loved him before turning to her mother.

"Mom?" she said, holding out the white ball she'd created for comparison purposes.

"Oh, honey, if Dad can't do it what makes you think I can?"

"Actually," Tom put in with a wink before Kitty could respond, "I think you might be surprised."

"Uh-huh," Janet replied, sounding supremely unimpressed. "Oh, fine," she gave in, dutifully extending a hand, only to snatch it back a second later when the ball Kitty was holding turned bright green. "Oh

my God," she gasped in shock, covering her mouth with one hand. "Oh my God!"

"That's my girl," Steve whooped, sharing triumphant looks with the others, but Janet didn't seem to hear him.

"No! It can't be!" she whispered desperately as her face lost all color. "Thu-they said...they said..."

Frowning, Steve put his hands on her shoulders. "Jannie, we just told the kids they weren't going to get kicked out of the family. That applies to you too," he teased gently, but instead of being pacified, Janet only got more agitated. Knocking Steve's hands away, she made a grab for the diaper bag and pawed through it until she found her cell phone.

"Oh, my God, I can't believe this! All this time..." she babbled desperately, shaking the instrument angrily when she couldn't get it to connect. "Damn thing, I can never get a signal in here..." she growled, rising from her seat and pacing the room.

Kitty looked like she might burst into tears any minute, so Harry rose and stood behind her offering what comfort he could. "Easy," he said quietly, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I don't know what your mum's on about, but it's not your fault."

"Janet," Steve said uncertainly, before his voice took on a scolding tone. "You forgot to take your medicine today, didn't you!"

"What? No! I just...I just need to call my folks. I have to get this straightened out. Just...just stay here. Watch the kids for a second. Shouldn't take long. I...I'll be right back," she said, darting out of the parlor before anyone could stop her.

"Janet, wait!" Steve hollered after her but she'd already cleared the door into Muggle London. Instinctively he took a couple of steps forward before remembering his daughters and swearing softly.

Harry shook his head when Steve turned back. "Go on," he said, holding up a hand. "We'll be fine."

Steve eyed him uncertainly. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I'll fill the pitcher and then we'll follow you to your place. Don't worry, I'll watch them until you two get this sorted."

Steve appeared to argue briefly with himself, then nodded tersely. "Thanks. I owe you."

Janet Wright shook her head angrily as she tore up the street. That was what was so familiar about those letters. It had been bugging her for days. She had received a postageless postmarkless letter right after her tenth birthday.

"Look Mom! There's a letter for me!"

"That's nice dear. Who's it from?"

"I don't know...it says The Salem Witches' Institute across the top..."

"WHAT?"

"Dear Miss Andrerson, Congratulations and welcome! You have been accepted into the Salem Witches' Institute..."

Oh my God, Janet thought again, before settling into a more satisfying mantra of Damn...damn...damn... in time with her pounding footfalls. She had a rather ground-eating stride despite her small frame, so it wasn't long before she was leaning against her front door and swearing roundly because she'd fled from the Leaky Cauldron with nothing more than the cell phone that was still clenched in her fist.

Curbing a wild urge to throw the device as hard as she could, Janet closed her eyes and leaned her back against the door and trying to catch her breath. Sanity was returning now, and with it, the undeniable fact that she'd made a complete and utter fool of herself. How was she going to reassure Kitty? And how would she ever face Tom and Jim again?

"Forget something?" a voice asked out of nowhere, making her eyes fly open again.

Oh, great, and let's not forget Mr. Show-Me-Hard-Facts-Not-Vague-Feelings, Janet thought a bit uncharitably as she accepted the diaper bag with a sigh. Since she was obviously all right now, Steve had his arms folded on his chest and was regarding her with his best "You Got Some 'Splainin' To Do" expression.

Steve.

Alone.

"Steve! Where are the kids?" she almost shrieked, her fragile calm cracking.

He was beside her in a blink. "Shh, it's okay. They're with Sparky. He's going to give us a few minutes then bring them here," he said, reaching into his jeans pocket for his housekey. "So would you mind terribly telling me what the hell that was all about? You scared poor Kitty to death, not to mention the rest of us," he scolded as he unlocked the door.

Shamed, Janet lowered her eyes. "I know. I'm sorry. I just..." She stopped and took a deep breath.

Relenting, Steve laid his palm between her shoulder blades and gently steered her into the kitchen. "Here, sit down."

When he had taken the chair beside her, Janet haltingly explained how the odd letters she'd gotten had seemed vaguely familiar in looks if not in content, and how turning Kitty's ball green had finally enabled her to recall the letter she'd received from the Salem Witches' Institute.

"I hadn't thought about it in years," she admitted. "I still don't remember it clearly. I just remember Mom taking it away from me. She was angry--I guess she thought I'd been targeted by some scam artist or weird cult."

"Well your folks have always been hyper-protective of you, Jannie," Steve commented carefully. "Although under those circumstances I can't say I blame them."

Janet shrugged. "I guess. Some people showed up not long after that, claiming to be representatives of the school. They talked to my mom, telling her about their school and asking her if she'd ever noticed any out-of-the-ordinary behaviors from me." She paused and flicked Steve an ironic look.

"Of course they never had," she continued after a second. "If this gut feeling I get from time to time is actually some kind of...ability...she wouldn't have. I never did anything obvious, I was always just a really good guesser."

"No, Janet," Steve disagreed. "It's more than that. Look, I've lived with you now for a number of years, and if I've noticed, your folks must have. You do things without even realizing it sometimes, like just now when you asked Jim about his aunt and uncle and mentioned Child Protective Services. He wasn't giving a lot away. I had no idea that was what was bothering him, but you zeroed right in on it. I think you freaked the poor kid out."

Janet mulled this over, jumping when someone rapped twice on the door before cautiously opening it. She started to get up, but Steve held her in her seat. "It's probably the kids. Stay while I make sure," he said, disappearing into the living room and re-entering a few minutes later with the pitcher of pumpkin juice. "They're fine," he assured Janet as he put the jug in the refrigerator. "They're going to watch a movie."

Janet watched as he reclaimed his seat and took her hand. "I suppose the school delegation will be visiting us soon," she commented with a shaky little laugh. Steve nodded.

"Yeah, we'll have some choices to make soon," he agreed. "One of which might be where Kitty goes to school. Jim might be helpful to talk to. He's obviously still in school and can tell us about the one he goes to."

"But he said he goes to boarding school," Janet objected, sounding almost comically aghast. "I don't want to send Kitty away."

Steve sighed. "Look, we don't have all the facts, so lets not go borrowing trouble. It's a good bet that Kitty will be getting a letter from somewhere at some time in the near future, so let's just wait and see what our options are, okay?"

"Okay."

"So, ready to go check on the kids?" he asked after a few minutes of silence, chuckling at the nervous look on her face. "Come on," he chuckled, rising and extending a hand.

Janet allowed him to haul her to her feet and lead her into the living room, already trying to decide how on earth she was ever going to explain herself. I've probably scarred Kitty for life and Jim probably thinks I'm a complete moron...oh! Oh, how cuuuute!

Steve grinned and shook his head as he considered the pile of sleeping kids on the couch. Poor Jim was scrunched up against the arm of the sofa with Becky in his lap, and Kitty huddled against his side. "I didn't figure they'd last long," he commented softly. "Jim's looked fit to collapse since he fell out of the fireplace."

"Yeah...and he never did tell us what he was so worried about, did he? We got to talking about the letters instead," Janet mused absently, spying the camera and squeezing off a quick shot before moving over to the couch. "Come on, lets get the girls upstairs so Jimmy can stretch out."

Steve nodded, lifting Kitty while Janet stopped the tape and plucked Becky out of Sparky's lap. When the girls were snugly tucked into their beds and the baby monitor was on, they returned to the living room.

Sparky was still as they'd left him, only now he was shivering a little. Janet knelt by the couch and frowned when she laid her hand against his cheek.

"What is it?" Steve asked, noting her concern.

"Fever," Janet sighed, tugging Sparky's headband off so she could reach his forehead. "Steve, he's really hot. Maybe we should set up the new air mattress for him. It might be more comfortable than the couch," she suggested, pulling a crocheted afgan off the back of the couch and wrapping it around her charge.

"It might," Steve agreed. "I'll set it up in the study."

"Where?"

"I thought we could turn that little spare room into a study or a library," Steve shrugged. "Extra bedding is in the hall closet, right?"

"Yeah, the bed's there too--but I thought that was going to be our guest room!"

"Well then I guess we should put the matter to a vote. Wanna flip for it?"

" Steeeeeeve! "

"All right, fine, we'll discuss it later. Where's the pump?"

"It's one of those new ones with the attached pump, remember? All you should have to do is plug it in."

"Right. No, I can set the bed up," he said when she rose and started to follow him. "You do a quick check of the pantry and the medicine cabinets and see if we need to run to the store. I'll help you get him up to the study once the bed's made."

"Okay...wait a minute, you mean our guest room don't you?"

"Fine, fine, the study our guest room," he returned with a dismissive wave. "One of us has to go let Tom know what's going on, so it might as well be me. Make a list of anything we're out of and I'll stop by the store on my way back," he instructed before disappearing up the stairs.

According to the Harry Potter Lexicon, Daisy Dodderidge built the Leaky Cauldron in 1500.

I'm basing this off the "Aerobed" brand mattress which I believe came out in the mid-1990s. If my memory is not correct, call it artistic license. I like the fact that this particular product is raised off the floor somewhat. I also find it more comfortable and easier to deal with than a traditional air mattress.

Chapter 31: On Your Mark, Get Set...
July 25, 1995

"Mr. Euan Abercrombie," Minerva McGonagall read from her list of incoming First Years, making the boy's name appear on a standard acceptance letter, then stuffing it and an appropriate supply list into an envelope with a flick of her wand. Her enchanted registration quill and envelope sealer hovered beside her, ready to address and close the envelopes as fast as she could fill them.

Years of experience had made McGonagall an old hand at this task, but she was feeling rather frazzled today as she went about it. Thank goodness she still had a little time before the letters to returning students had to be sent out! She'd considered just doing the whole lot, before realizing she couldn't. She and the other heads of house had submitted their recommendations weeks ago--just before the end of term--but Professor Dumbledore still hadn't selected this year's new Prefects and the Head Boy and Girl yet.

Frowning at the slip, McGonagall paused to search through her papers, making sure he hadn't dropped it off while she was out. Odd. The headmaster usually had the list at her disposal early in the summer so she would have it whenever she wanted to begin sending out the student letters. Perhaps it had slipped his mind in all the excitement.

Sighing, Minerva shook her head sadly. Excitement indeed! As soon as she finished here, she planned to go back to Diagon Alley to search for the mysterious "Jim Patterson" again. She'd caught tantalizing glimpses of the boy through the Leaky Cauldron's windows, but he'd neatly managed to escape close inspection by staying inside the pub late Sunday afternoon and evening, and Flooing to some unknown location for most of Monday. If this kept up she was going to have to try and sneak inside the Leaky Cauldron or one of the other shops to observe him instead of simply catching him on the street as she'd planned.

Unfortunately, that would have to wait. Right now, the First Years had to take precedence. The Muggleborn students' letters really had to go out today if their families were going to have any time to make plans.

It would be a shame if they couldn't take advantage of the guided tours of Diagon Alley. As it was, the first Sunday in August was probably going to be something of a rush, but it couldn't be helped. It seemed like there had been no end of distractions and delays this summer--everything from You Know Who's return and Harry Potter's disappearance to getting booklets printed. Luckily, she hadn't needed many, so the printer had graciously agreed to squeeze in a short run for her.

For a fee, of course.

Smiling, Minerva surveyed the neat stack of booklets on her desk and decided it had been worth it. Such a simple, practical idea! It really was disgraceful that no one had thought to offer tours before. If anything, it showed how little effort had been put into easing the transition into the Magical World. Students like Hermione Granger most recently, Lily Potter in the past, and others over the years should have been enough to smash the "pure blood" propaganda into tiny pieces, but the "Muggles/Muggleborns are inferior" sentiment remained nonetheless despite all efforts to change it.

By the time Miss Rose Zeller's letter was finished, there were several noticeably thicker envelopes in the stack. Not seeing any reason to delay, McGonagall had decided to take care of all the incoming First Years, rather than sending some now and some later. Frowning critically, Minerva plucked one of the thicker letters out of the pile and absently weighed it in her hand, making sure the new booklet along with the welcoming letters and extra correspondence wouldn't be too much for the school owls. After some deliberation, she had left the acceptance letters alone, and simply added an extra note advising the Muggle families of this new service, and instructing them to pick a date and respond if they were interested in participating.

Letters finished, McGonagall gathered them up, meaning to go directly to the owlery, then paused and flipped quickly through them, scanning the addresses and making sure none of them were headed anywhere...unusual. In all her years of sending out student correspondence, she'd never once thought to double check her enchanted quill. There was no need to, as the device was quite

accurate, but one of the images Albus had shown was the day Harry Potter had received his first Hogwarts letter.

Cupboard under the stairs indeed! While no one, except perhaps Sirius, had blamed her for the oversight, Minerva still felt horrible about it. Of course the bigger question was why Potter's folder hadn't warned them of his circumstances, but the idiots at the Ministry were blocking any progress in answering it. Albus was handling that particular problem, and Minerva did not envy him.

While she was reading, the fireplace flared to life.

"Minerva--Oh!"

"MinNOIva--Ow!"

Looking up at the noise, McGonagall's eyes widened and she rushed over to the fireplace. Albus Dumbledore and Abigail Penstone had evidently appeared at exactly the same moment, and bumped into each other.

"Professor Penstone, how wonderful to see you. Please forgive my clumsiness," Albus greeted, recovering first.

"Nothing to forgive, Professor Dumbledore," the little blonde witch replied, still rubbing her forehead. "You're looking well...considering," she grinned. Glancing up at Minerva she added, "You too, Minnie. Lighten up, we're both fine and there are no students here for you to scare," she said, winking at her worried friend.

Minerva's lips twitched a little at that, but she resisted hiding behind the fan of letters. "I leave the scaring student duties to Severus," she informed the American witch primly.

"Fine, fine, intimidating, then. Did we catch you on the way out?" Abigail asked.

Minerva nodded. "I was just getting ready to send the acceptance letters out to the new First Years," she said, speaking to both her

guests before turning to Abby. "Did you send a letter to the student you contacted me about, or shall I send one out with these?"

In reply, Abby held a letter up for Minerva to take with her fireplace tongs. "I tried to send it, but it came back," she reported with a puzzled look on her face. "I knew it was about time for you to send out the rest of your letters, so I thought I'd ask you to try if you don't mind."

"Certainly," Minerva said, accepting the letter and adding it to the top of her stack.

"Excuse me Professor, but did you say the letter came back?" Dumbledore questioned.

Abigail nodded. "Yes, it was very strange. Jet is one of our most accurate overseas carriers. He flew away decisively enough, but he came back this morning with the letter, acting like he'd lost all sense of direction. As luck would have it, all of the other overseas capable birds are away at the moment."

"I'll take care of it," McGonagall assured her.

"Thanks, Minnie. Well since I caught you on the way out, and the Headmaster obviously wants to speak to you, I'll be on my way. Give me a shout when you're ready to go visit that family."

Minerva nodded. "I'll do that, Abby. I daresay it will be in the next few days. Lovely to see you."

"Goodbye Professor Dumbledore, nice bumping into you."

"And you, Professor Penstone. Please stop by and say hello when you come to Hogwarts."

Smiling, Abigail gave him a little nod, waved to Minerva, then disappeared with a pop.

Once she was gone Albus became all business. "I have something I would like to discuss with you, Minerva. Stand aside and I'll walk with you to the owlery."

Nodding again, Minerva did as he asked, straightening her stack of letters and gasping when she looked at the one Abigail had just given her. "Albus! It's happened again!"

"What has?" Dumbledore asked, looking up from brushing the soot off his robes.

Wordlessly, McGonagall held up the letter.

Miss K. Wright
Unknown
England

She'd expected his expression to mirror her own, a mixture of confusion and frustration, but to her surprise, Albus smiled a very satisfied smile instead.

"Check, Mr. Potter," he murmured softly, taking a letter out of his pocket, before turning to her. "I think I have an idea what's become of our wayward student. Come. I'll explain on the way."

As they entered the corridor and started towards the owlery, they were met by Professor Snape. "I just received a general summons for this evening, plus a separate message instructing me to bring the potions I brewed," he reported, falling into step with them without missing a beat. "I think it's safe to say that something is afoot."

"Yes, that would agree with information I received from another source," Dumbledore said consideringly. "Severus, come with me to my office to start alerting the Order. Minerva, meet us there as soon as you post your letters. Unless I am very much mistaken, the attack will take place tonight."

"Take it easy, will you?" Stephen Wright complained as he headed up the street, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Unfortunately this wasn't easy when a body had a snowy owl semi-permanently attached to one shoulder. She loosened her talons ever so slightly in

response to his complaint, but she obviously didn't plan to let him out of her sight.

Impressed in spite of himself, Steve considered the bird as he continued on his way. At first he'd been surprised by the boy's rather unusual pet, but had quickly shrugged it off after remembering he was dealing with rather unusual people. Besides, Tom had just told him the British magical community used owls to deliver messages. In light of that information, it made perfect sense, although he was still having a little trouble getting his head around that concept. After all the science fiction and fantasy reading he'd done and role playing games he'd participated in, glorified carrier pigeons weren't the first thing he thought of when he'd speculated on how wizards might communicate with one another.

Sparing a glance at his watch, Steve grimaced and picked up his pace. His little outing had taken longer than he anticipated. The shopping had been the worst of it, though. Once he'd gotten to the Leaky Cauldron things had gone much more smoothly. Tom had been immensely helpful, listening carefully while he sketched out the situation, showing him where Jim kept his things, and offering to look after the bird while the boy was unwell. Between the two of them, they'd packed a small overnight bag without too much trouble. Things were rolling right along until he tried to leave.

That was when he learned the owl--Hedwig--had other plans. As soon as it became evident that Jim wouldn't be returning that evening, and more importantly, that Steve was going to wherever Jim was, she'd invited herself along for the ride, latching onto his shoulder and refusing to let go. Tom hadn't even been able to coax her into her traveling cage.

So, now, instead of simply throwing a few necessities together for the boy, he had his shopping bags, plus Jim's bag, plus a birdcage and food, plus a very concerned owl clinging determinedly to his shoulder. Oh, well. At least she wasn't in danger of drawing blood anymore.

When he reached the house, Steve hesitated a second, remembering how his wife disliked the care and maintenance of caged creatures, then shrugged and walked up the front steps. If Jim shook off illness

as fast as Tom claimed, he'd only be down for a few days. They'd manage. Besides, he thought, warily eyeing the talons clamped on his shoulder, I'm not exactly in a position to refuse!

"Well, here we are," he informed his passenger, convinced by now that she could understand English. "He was sleeping when I left, so sit tight and we'll see what's going on," he continued, setting the cage down so he could pull his housekey out of his pocket.

"Steve?" Janet called, almost before he could get the door shut again. "Steve? Is that you?"

"Yeah," he replied, squashing his first response which was, No, it's your friendly neighborhood burglar. Janet didn't sound like she was in the mood to play.

"Good. Grab the mop and bucket and come up here, will you? I'm in the upstairs bath."

Aw, no, Steve groaned inwardly, scrunching his face in distaste, even as he called an affirmative back to his wife. That didn't bode well. While there was a faint possibility that Kitty or Becky had spilled something, or maybe slopped a little water out of the tub, with three sick kids in the house it was far more likely that someone was, well, sick.

Blecch!

Come on, Wright. Suck it up, he counseled himself as he detoured into the kitchen. He couldn't abandon Jannie to cope alone--not if he wanted to keep his health, home, and marriage, anyway--but if there was one thing he absolutely detested it was dealing with severe stomach upset.

Working quickly, he dropped off his purchases and Hedwig's accessories, securing the perishables in the refrigerator before grabbing the items Janet requested. Taking advantage of the kitchen sink, he added some water and a small squirt of soap to the bucket...just in case.

The bathroom door was only half closed, so he could easily hear what was going on inside. "Come on now, swish and spit," Janet was saying, verifying his earlier suspicions. Steve set Jim's bag down in the hall outside, guiltily relieved that the worst seemed to be over as her patient obeyed and the toilet flushed. Frowning, he noted the mostly quiet state of the house, and instantly decided it must be Jim in there with her. Kitty and Becky were not known for being "suffer in silence" types.

He was just about to announce his presence when Janet poked her head out, making them both jump in surprise. "Housekeeping," he joked weakly, while she leaned against the doorframe with her hand over her heart.

"Cripes, Steve, you scared me to death," she scolded, before noticing the owl on his shoulder and looking at him for an explanation.

"This is Hedwig, Sparky's owl," Steve introduced, not knowing what else to say. "Hedwig, my wife Janet." He waited uncertainly, not sure what her reaction was going to be, but Janet obviously had other things on her mind. After she got over her initial surprise, she shrugged in a "okay, fine, whatever" kind of way and nodded distractedly to the owl before trotting down to the linen closet to fetch a washcloth. When she returned she lowered her voice and quickly brought him up to speed.

"Jimmy's a little sicker than he was letting on," she murmured, nodding first at the boy who was still kneeling in front of the loo, then indicating the clear, green splatters on the floor. "He obviously didn't have anything in his stomach, and I'm sure all that acid felt wonderful against that throat of his. As soon as his stomach settles we're going to have to get some fluids in him. Were you able to find Popsicles?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah. Be advised they're known as 'iced lollies' here. How are the girls?" he asked as she wet the washcloth in the sink, bracing for the news that they were vomiting, too.

"Sleeping. They're both feverish now, but so far Jim is the only one who's throwing up," Janet reported, before wringing the cloth out and walking back to her patient.

Jim, Steve noted, had definitely seen better days. Poor kid. The boy was pale, sweaty, and looked about ready to die of chagrin. "Hey, bud," he greeted sympathetically, trying to keep things light as he dipped the mop into the bucket. "Feeling pretty puny, eh?"

He'd kept his voice soft, not wanting to startle Jim or wake the girls, but the boy started violently all the same. When Janet knelt beside him, he flinched away from her and immediately started to apologize.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he fretted, his voice raspy and rough. "I'll clean it up, I swear."

"Shh. Don't be silly," Janet said, making him break off in surprise when she coaxed his head up and began to bathe his face with the cool cloth.

"But...but I..."

"You threw up. Yeah. Did you do it on purpose?" she inquired, finishing his face and picking up one of his hands.

Jim looked a little taken aback at that. "No," he admitted, watching as she worked.

"Well, good," Janet responded, "because if you did, you have bigger problems than a little stomach bug." She inspected the hand she was working on, then nodded and reached for the other. Steve noted with amusement that while Jim didn't seem to know what to make of this behavior, he wasn't doing anything to stop it either.

"Look, Sweets, everyone gets sick," Janet continued patiently, as she finished her ministrations and tossed the cloth into the sink. "It's just one of those things. No one thinks any less of you, and it's not a sin to need a little caring for now and then, okay?"

Jim was looking at Janet like she'd grown another head, so Steve decided to put his two cents in. "On the other hand, if this had to happen, at least you reached the tile before you lost it," he said,

giving Sparky a teasing wink. "Cleaning the carpet would have been a real pain."

Jim managed a weak smile at that. "Yeah."

"Oh, and speaking of cleaning," Steve continued, wringing the mop over the bucket, then dumping the soapy water in the tub, "I brought some of your stuff from the Leaky Cauldron--oh! Here it is," he said, grinning as Hedwig launched herself off his shoulder, then fluttered back in with the overnight bag gripped firmly in her talons.

Steve waited while she dropped the bag unceremoniously on the floor by the boy and settled on his outstretched arm before continuing. "You'll probably want to take out your contacts and change into your pajamas before Jannie makes you go back to bed. Might want to brush your teeth, too," he added as an afterthought, stopping and giving Sparky a quizzical look when he grew tense and wary again. "What is it?"

Jim closed his eyes a second, stroking Hedwig's snowy plumage. "Do you remember what we were talking about at the Leaky Cauldron?" he asked at length. "Before you showed your letter to Tom and me?"

"Vaguely. I think you said you wanted to tell us something, and you were afraid we weren't going to like it," Steve supplied, while Janet nodded. "But seriously kid, this can wait until you're well again."

He'd meant to calm and reassure the boy, but if anything, Jim seemed to grow even more agitated. "No," he disagreed stubbornly. "It can't. Please. Please listen. You're in danger." Turning his head, he looked at Janet. "Remember the day we met? You asked me about my family and I told you my parents were killed when I was a baby?"

"Yes," she verified, drawing the word out a bit while she searched her memory. "That was when you were sent to live with your aunt and uncle, wasn't it?"

"That's right. I wasn't lying to you, I just left a few bits out. The thing is, my mum and dad were killed by a dark wizard. He had a group of

followers--I guess the closest Muggle comparison would be a terrorist organization."

Feeling colder by the minute, Steve took Janet's hand, and listened, transfixed, as the boy's tale unfolded. By the time Jim finished, he and Janet were shocked speechless.

"So let me get this straight," Janet said, ticking off the salient points on her fingers. "Your real name is Harry Potter. When your parents were murdered, you were sent to live with your aunt and uncle who, by the way, decided to move overseas this summer without a forwarding address. Furthermore, you survived the Killing Curse with nothing but a scar, you're supposed to be the last great hope against this Voldemort character who 'returned' somehow at the end of last month, and you've been hiding in disguise all summer?"

"Erm, yes."

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," Janet mumbled, holding her forehead, while Steve ran a hand through his short, brown hair. Whatever he'd been expecting the boy to say, it hadn't been this!

"I'm sorry," Jim--Harry said miserably, his voice a hoarse whisper by now. He reached out an uncertain hand, finally laying it gingerly on Janet's shoulder after a series of tentative pats. "I didn't want to mislead you, I just...I don't know. I'm sorry to be so much trouble. I'll just take Hedwig and go."

Steve snorted before he could stop himself. "Yeah, suuuure you will," he scoffed, watching the boy's wobbly attempts to stand for a couple of seconds before taking him by the upper arm and hauling him to his feet. Startled by the sudden movement, Hedwig fluttered up to perch on a towel rod, watching the proceedings carefully.

"Don't be ridiculous, Sparky," Janet scolded gently, steering him over to the sink while Steve lifted the overnight bag onto the counter. "You're in no condition to take care of yourself, and Tom certainly doesn't have the time to look after you--not without closing the Leaky Cauldron at any rate. Besides, I'm going to be taking care of sick kids

for the next few days anyway, so you might as well stay here until you're feeling better."

Sighing, Harry fished his toothbrush out of his bag, then bit his lip. "But..." he tried again, but Steve interrupted him.

"Look kid, I appreciate what you're trying to do, and it's good to know that you don't want to put us in any danger, but the problem is we may already be there," he pointed out, indicating his wife. "Jannie's managed to attract the attention of some fruitcake and we still don't know--hey! Whoa! Easy there," he said, quickly moving to steady the boy when he wobbled unsteadily, and his toothbrush clattered noisily into the sink.

"No, oh no, oh God," Sparky mumbled, bringing a trembling hand to his mouth and looking like he might be sick all over again.

"What? What is it?" Janet asked, moving to his other side. "Please honey, talk to us. We can't help you if you don't tell us what's wrong!"

"I think I know where your letters came from," he said shakily, then stopped as though uncertain how to proceed. "I...my scar...it's hard to explain, but sometimes I know what Voldemort's up to. It's like a connection of sorts. Sometimes I just get vague feelings, other times, I can see or hear him." He swallowed painfully, and paused as though trying to gauge their reaction.

"Okay," Janet encouraged, while Steve nodded beside her.

The boy blinked in surprise. "Okay?" he echoed incredulously.

"Oh, trust me, I can relate," Janet informed him with a wry grin.

"But doesn't this sound odd to you?" he pressed. "How do you know I'm not having you on?"

Steve exchanged a look with Janet. "Harry, I just learned magic exists today. Do you really think anything you tell me is going to sound all that weird given that?"

"Besides, Steve and I have a lot to learn, and you've never let me down before. I was sort of hoping you'd continue translating for us," Janet added, making a grateful smile appear on the boy's face. Steve watched as he seemed to argue with himself, before shrugging and facing them squarely.

"I overheard a conversation between Voldemort and some of his followers today, right before I came back to the Leaky Cauldron," he stated, still watching them as though he expected to be corrected or dismissed. When they remained silent, he went on. "One of them admitted to sending owls to some Muggles. Voldemort was angry because they're supposed to be laying low. He thought the Ministry of Magic had gotten involved because the owls are bringing their letters back undelivered now."

"Are they?" Steve wondered aloud. "The Ministry, I mean." Harry considered that briefly before shaking his head.

"I don't think so. The Minister doesn't believe Voldemort has returned since he only has my word to go on."

"Wait, so you're saying nothing's being done about this Voldemort person?" Janet asked, aghast.

"Not that I know of," Harry verified with a shrug, before returning to the earlier subject. "The letter thing seems to fit because I've been having trouble getting owls as well. Only Hedwig seems to be able to find me."

Steve turned that over in his head, deciding it didn't sound altogether bad. "So, this is a good thing, right?" he asked, seeking validation. "It seems like a measure of protection."

"Maybe," Harry allowed, rubbing his forehead like he had a headache coming on. "Not being able to get mail is a bit of a nuisance, though." Steve guiltily realized that the kid was still sick and should probably go back to bed instead of standing here discussing hypotheses. He opened his mouth to say just that, but Janet beat him to it, clapping her hands once and assuming a brisk air.

"Well, whatever it is, it'll keep for now," she declared, patting Harry on the back. "C'mon. Finish up, and we'll get you back to bed. How's your stomach now? You should probably try to drink something if you can."

Obviously thrown by the sudden change of topic, Harry blinked uncomprehendingly before looking uncertain again, "Are you sure you want me to stay? I mean..."

"We're sure. I don't know what kind of people you're accustomed to dealing with but I'll be damned if I'm going to throw a sick kid out in the street. If no one knows who you really are, we'll be safe enough until we can get this straightened out," Steve reasoned while Janet bustled off to the kitchen. "But for Pete's sake, warn me if you feel sick again."

Fortunately for Steve's delicate sensibilities, Harry was able to finish up without further incident, and was soon tucked back into bed. Just to be safe, Steve brought the bucket along with them. Harry was still showing signs of being nauseated, and really wasn't in any condition to be running back and forth to the bathroom. In fact, he'd broken a light sweat just walking from the bath in the hall back to the room they'd settled him in.

Trying to put the boy at ease, Steve cast around for something to say, finally drawn back to Harry's rather unusual eye color. The song "Jeepers Creepers" had come rather forcibly to mind when he had removed his contact lenses and put on his glasses instead.

"Good call with the color contacts," he complimented offhandedly, taking a seat in the chair he'd dragged in, and hoping it didn't sound too random. "You did a really good job with your disguise. That eye color of yours is cool and all, but it sticks out like a sore thumb."

Harry made a little noise of agreement, and smiled slightly at the praise. "I didn't think it was going to work, but all I had to hide was the eyes and the scar. That's what people look for," he offered diffidently. "My hair, too, I reckon, but I can only do so much with that."

"Like the reporter the other day," Steve said, realization dawning.

"Yeah, like that."

"Well you know," Steve said, only half teasing, as he ran a hand over his own close-cropped brown hair, "you could always get it clipped short."

"My aunt tried that once. It didn't work out," Harry commented, glancing over at the door.

Guessing that Harry was wondering what was holding Janet up, Steve chuckled and shook his head. "Give her a few minutes," he advised. "She's gathering."

Leaf-green eyes regarded him again. "Gathering?"

Steve nodded, keeping a cool facade on the outside while gleefully anticipating his wife's return on the inside. Janet was going to have kittens when she saw Harry's true eye color. "Yeah. It's impossible for her to go downstairs for one item," he confided in an exaggerated manner. "She's probably thought of about a half dozen things you might like to have. Her family calls her 'Little Miss Just-In-Case' behind her back."

Harry chuckled a little at that, but soon sobered, looking as though he was recalling something unpleasant. Steve fell silent for a moment or two, trying to decide if now was the time to go poking into this particular can of worms. Upsetting sick people generally wasn't the best idea, and as a rule he left the "hunches" and "feelings" to Janet, but Harry had some traits and mannerisms in common with some troops he'd known in the past. Janet probably wouldn't be back for a few minutes, so he flipped a mental coin and decided to go for it.

"Jannie told me that you don't talk about your family a lot," he started conversationally, "and I'm not going to ask you to now," he added hastily when the boy stiffened in surprise, and his eyes, which had been about to droop closed, popped open. "However, I think I'm safe in assuming that your aunt and uncle aren't people you ever felt you could depend on. Is that right?"

He didn't want pity, that much was plain, Steve noted, as he raised his eyebrows questioningly, requesting confirmation. He could almost hear the boy weighing his options, and by the look on his face, he was bracing for platitudes or a lecture of some kind. When Steve remained silent, he finally shrugged and nodded.

Reasonably assured he wasn't barking up the wrong tree, Steve continued, veering away from the aunt and uncle, and reaching for the heart of the matter. "When you're in the military, you meet all kinds. Some are kids fresh out of high school, others are older. Some join because of their ideals, others just want the college money. It's an interesting life, but one thing that's really stressed is teamwork," he remembered aloud. "It sounds simple, but some people I knew really struggled with it. The reasons were about as varied as the people themselves, but what it all boiled down to was, it was hard for them to rely on others."

Harry didn't say anything, but he looked down guiltily almost out of reflex. Steve watched him for a second or two then nodded, and subtly shifted the topic again. "I know you're afraid for the people you care for, and that's a very good trait, but I think you're making a mistake trying to do this alone. In my experience, it's better to have someone around to watch your back."

Troubled green eyes raised to meet his again. Harry obviously hadn't completely bought the idea, but at least he hadn't dismissed it out of hand. Actually, this was going better than Steve thought. He hadn't expected Harry to immediately agree with him anyway. Things just weren't that simple. Normally what he'd found worked best was to throw an opinion out for consideration and let the person in question mull things over for a while and come to their own conclusions. One last point, then it would be time to back off and let the ideas marinate.

"Look, I don't know what's going on, but we all seem to have been dragged into it together," he said honestly. "You have experience I lack, so instead of considering yourself 'trouble', think of yourself as a valued member of the team. There's safety in numbers, and the more eyes we have the better--especially where the girls are concerned." He paused a beat then added, "well, the little girls, anyway. I pity anyone stupid enough to get on Janet's bad side."

Harry looked like he might comment to that, but changed his mind when they heard the topic of their conversation climbing back up the stairs. "Hey! You decent in there?" she asked softly, still out in the hall.

"Depends on your definition of 'decent', but I think you're safe this time," Steve replied, making Harry chuckle when he climbed to his feet with a theatrical groan. Dropping his voice, he leaned in and predicted, "you wait, she won't be here five minutes before she says 'just in case'."

"Hi, sweets," Janet smiled as she entered, carrying a tray that held the ice water she'd gone down for, plus various odds and ends like a bottle of pain reliever, broth and soda crackers, the book he'd started the night he'd watched Kitty and Becky, tissues, and a little bell. "Sorry to take so long, but I thought you might like to have these...just in case." Taking his cue, Steve stood behind her and spread his hands in a "See, What Did I Tell You?" sort of way, watching, amused, as Harry struggled not to laugh.

Janet was so caught up in her explanations she didn't notice the side conversation...which was probably a good thing. Steve moved over to the wall and leaned against it, waiting for Janet to stop pointing at the tray and look up. The bell was so Harry could get their attention without having to shout, she knew he was sick but she thought he might be able to tolerate broth and crackers, and he was to please drink as much water as he could.

As the number of unexplained items on the tray diminished in number, Steve found himself leaning forward in anticipation. It won't be long now...hah! he chuckled to himself as Janet broke off right in the middle of assuring Harry that he could have another book if the one she'd brought had bored him to sleep, and exclaimed, "Oh, my God!"

"He was wearing color contacts," Steve supplied, grinning mischievously while Janet gripped the boy's chin and turned his head so she could look him full in the face. "The green is his natural eye color. Cool, eh?"

"Cool? Cool?" Janet repeated, her voice going up at least an octave. "That's the most despicable, disgusting thing I've ever seen!"

That was the last thing Steve had expected her to say. Harry, too, judging from the shocked and hurt look on his face. "Janet," he scolded unbelievably, launching himself away from the wall and hurrying over, but she wasn't listening.

"It isn't fair!" she wailed, throwing her hands in the air. "Thick, dark lashes, and absolutely gorgeous green eyes wasted on a man!" She paused a moment then rounded on Harry. "Tell me you have your mother's eyes!" she demanded authoritatively. "Lie to me if you have to!"

"I have my mother's eyes," the boy dutifully repeated, after blinking a few times and uttering a startled laugh. "No, really!" he insisted when she crossed her arms and gave him her famous "Are You Putting Me On?" look. "I have photos back at the Leaky Cauldron."

Janet smiled the sappy smile Steve had been expecting from the first, and sat in the chair by the mattress. "Good," she said, reaching out and smoothing the boy's hair back from his face.

"So you like them, then?" Harry asked, as though seeking verification.

Janet blinked like she'd been slapped. "Of course I do! Your eye color is stunning--oh," she interrupted herself, obviously realizing what she'd said a moment ago. "Oh, that sounded awful, didn't it? I'm sorry, sweetie. Sometimes my mouth gets ahead of my brain," she admitted, sheepishly. "Forgive?"

Harry quirked a little half smile. "Forget it."

Janet smiled gratefully, absently laying the back of her hand on Harry's cheek, then frowning and leaning closer. "Does this mark on your head hurt, Sparky?" she asked, studying it closely, but being careful not to touch it, "it's awfully red."

Harry shrugged, seeming unsurprised by the observation. "It twinges a bit," he admitted, obviously trying to downplay and allay her fears.

"The link, you know. Voldemort has been excited about something all day, but I can't tell what," he said, trying without success to stifle a yawn.

"Well, don't worry now. Rest and get better," Janet advised rising from the chair. "We'll be right here if you need anything."

Lord Voldemort sat on a slightly raised dais, smirking smugly to himself. Running an appraising eye over the growing assembly before him, he enjoyed the looks on the faces of his Death Eaters as they arrived. They were curious at least, appalled at most, but no one was brave (or perhaps foolhardy enough) to ask what was on all their minds.

Namely, 'What are these Muggles doing here?' or at the very least, 'Why aren't we torturing them?'

Unconcerned, the Dark Lord let them stew. He would tell them what they needed to know when the time was right, and not one second before. His plan was a stroke of sheer genius if he did say so himself, but for it to work absolute secrecy was required. He couldn't risk losing the element of surprise. If Dumbledore somehow found out and stuck his long nose in, the whole thing would be for naught. Ironical, really, since it was the old man's machinations that had inspired this plot in the first place.

Smiling at Nagini as she slithered up the side of the throne like chair he was sitting in, Voldemort stroked her head idly while continuing to gloat over the coming attack. Ten days ago when he and Severus Snape had twisted Potter's address out of Wormtail, he'd immediately begun to consider how to make the best use of it. Truthfully, he'd been unusually indecisive in deciding how to deal with his foe.

His original scheme had been direct and to the point: Rig the Tri-Wizard Tournament, harvest the boy's blood, kill him in a Wizard's Duel, and portkey his remains back to Hogwarts. Simple, elegant, and guaranteed to put the Wizarding World in an uproar.

Suppressing an angry growl, Voldemort ground his teeth together. He still hexed hapless lackeys in frustration when he recalled how Potter had taken advantage of the round trip Portkey spell on the Tri-Wizard

Tournament cup and made good his escape. Did that scruffy brat not have any sense of the dramatic? Could he not comprehend that the return spell was supposed to send his lifeless body back to Dumbledore's doorstep after he'd served his purpose and suffered a stunning defeat? He still had the note he'd planned to pin to the boy's shirt announcing his return.

Still, it hadn't been a complete loss, Voldemort admitted grudgingly. Things might have even worked out for the better. Thanks to Potter, someone's dead body had been sent back to Hogwarts, sparking off confusion and panic as he'd planned. The Dark Lord had gotten a great deal of entertainment listening to the eyewitness account Severus Snape had given, and the secondhand tales his Death Eater parents had gotten from their children.

Even better, the other boy's death had put Potter in a very awkward position, and cast if not blame, then strong suspicion on him and anyone who supported him. The minister had also sunk his head firmly in the sand, stoutly refusing to believe a word Potter said.

An unexpected bonus.

If he played his cards right he'd have more than ample time to plan and regroup, Voldemort gloated, regaining a bit of his previous good humor. The question remained, though, what should he do about Potter?

Initially, after the boy's escape, he'd spent a lot of time plotting a "fitting" end for his foe, but the more he'd thought about it, the more he reckoned he'd had the right of it in the beginning. Simpler was better. Once he had the boy in his clutches he'd kill him straightaway. No traps, no duels, nothing he could manage to wiggle out of. It was a pity, since some of the ideas he'd had were truly magnificent, but he couldn't risk another fiasco like the night in the cemetery.

He'd waited fourteen years to curse Harry Potter into oblivion. He could wait a little longer.

In the meantime, he'd indulge in his current scheme. Things were coming to fruition tonight, and judging from the complete confusion in

his Death Eaters' faces and thoughts, no one knew what he was up to.

Leaning his elbows on the arms of the chair, the dark wizard steeped his fingers in front of his face. This attack had been a very close thing, he admitted, recalling how he had disappeared away from the shack where Pettigrew had been questioned, leaving Snape to deal with the mess. The information had been exhilarating and maddening at the same time. On one hand, he knew the boy's exact location, on the other hand, if he approached, he'd almost certainly trip half a dozen alarms.

Taking care to stay out of range of any warding, he'd apparated to Surrey, feeling manic glee and utter frustration by turns. He wasn't stupid enough to risk being seen, but being this close to his quarry without being able to act was intolerable. Sneering in disgust, he'd hidden himself behind an invisibility spell and watched enviously as those worthless Muggles paraded up and down the streets, and then it had hit him.

There might be a use for Muggles after all.

Muggles could approach Potter's home without being detected by the Ministry. Muggles weren't considered a threat. In fact, if there was a risk of a Muggle stumbling across something magical, the Ministry of Magic would simply cast a few Muggle Aversion Charms to simply keep them away, much like witches and wizards would use screen spells to keep insects away from their outdoor gatherings.

So how could he use this to his advantage?

Looking around the Muggle neighborhood he found himself in, Voldemort had been immediately struck by the similarity of the structures. If Potter's home was simply one in a crowd, he could examine any house he chose to get a general idea of how the place was laid out. All he had to do was get close enough to see which model Potter lived in...

...or send someone to look for him.

Voldemort smiled a very self-satisfied smile as he recalled his little brainstorm. He had very nearly laughed out loud as the perfect plan occurred to him. It was genius, sheer genius, and the beauty of it was, no one would ever suspect what he was up to.

Eager to test his theory, he cast the Imperious Curse on the next Muggle who passed by, and ordered them to find number four Privet Drive.

He had waited tensely for the woman to return, ready to melt into the shadows if he had miscalculated, but within an hour she was back with very startling news.

Potter's residence seemed to be for sale.

Puzzled, Voldemort had returned to his headquarters, trying without success to resolve some conflicting factors:

If Potter had been moved to another home, the defenses around in this neighborhood should have been dismantled and reconstructed elsewhere.

He had several "trusted" agents within the Ministry, Lucius Malfoy among them, who would be aware of a project of that magnitude, yet no one had said a thing.

Deciding to try again in the daylight, he'd traveled back to Surrey the next day and repeated the exercise.

That was when things had gotten interesting.

Snape's potion should have ensured Wormtail's information was correct, and the Muggle from the night before had been quite sure she'd found the proper house, but none of the Muggles he'd bewitched and sent in search of number four the following day had been able to see it.

Curious, he had waited for some report from Malfoy or one of the others planted in the Ministry, but no one seemed to have noticed

anything unusual with regard to Potter's whereabouts, even when very subtly questioned.

He'd been on the verge of calling a full meeting and cursing all his Death Eaters for general incompetence, when a new scenario had occurred to him.

Dumbledore.

The old codger was laying a trap for him.

Voldemort was not privy to the whys and hows of the situation, and had no idea how many layers of subterfuge there were (Dumbledore's seeming "feud" with the Minister might be a clever front for all he knew) but the more he pondered it, the more it seemed absolutely correct. Impressed in spite of himself, the Dark Lord marveled at the example of almost perfect secrecy. What was worse, he'd been so busy planning the perfect revenge, he'd very nearly fallen for it.

That, of course, had put a whole new slant on things, Voldemort gloated as he watched more Death Eaters arrive. The ones who had been among the first to answer his summons were being eaten alive with curiosity by now. Too bad.

If Dumbledore wanted to play that way, he was certainly up to the challenge.

I give you points for originality, old man, Voldemort sneered to himself. You're good, but I am better.

After a ridiculously short amount of research, he'd learned that Muggles, like wizards, had elements among them that would sell out their own mothers for a few pounds. Running an appraising eye over the street toughs he'd hired, Voldemort's lips twisted in a cruel smile. They had been enchanted to see what they expected to see, so they were oblivious to the confusion they were causing, and actually quite calm as they waited for his order to proceed. If they did well, he might allow them to live. Good help was so hard to find.

His intended victims would be sleeping, and not expecting a physical attack.

It's going to be just like old times, Voldemort exulted as he watched a few more Death Eaters appear. There were just a few more to go now. After everyone else arrived he would call the last one on the list...one Severus Snape.

Harry groaned softly as he shifted on the bed, trying without success to find a comfortable position. He didn't think he could ever recall feeling this horrible...well, not without the Cruciatus Curse being involved, anyway. On top of a miserable sore throat, scar pain, and general body aches, fever was making him too hot or too cold by turns, not to mention drowsy and lethargic, and his stomach was enthusiastically trying to turn itself inside out every hour or so--whether there was anything in it or not.

Wincing at the memory of his last bout, Harry kicked weakly at the blankets covering him, desperate to escape the overheated feeling of his skin. Vomiting and sore throats were bad enough separately, thanks. Together--eugh! The raw acid on his throat combined with his weakened state and the protests of his abused abdominal muscles had been enough to reduce him to tears.

"Shh. Easy now..." a voice said softly in his ear, making Harry stiffen in surprise, then sigh with relief as the stifling blankets were pulled back. Janet, the small part of his brain that was still semifunctional supplied, as she gently bathed his boiling face and half baked arms with a cool cloth.

"How's he doing?" a new voice asked, after a while.

A sigh. "About the same. What did the doctor say?"

"About what you thought--keep him comfortable, push fluids. There's a viral bug going around that generally runs its course in about twelve hours. Those sore throats are another matter. The doc thinks the kids will probably need antibiotics, so I made an appointment for them tomorrow morning."

"Are Kitty and Becky still asleep?"

"Mama! Muh-Mah-Maaaaaaa!"

"Offhand, I'd say no. Here, tag in. They aren't going to settle for me again."

"I can't imagine why, we all know what a wonderful nurse you are."

"True, true, I missed my calling..."

Harry sensed rather than heard or saw Janet leave and Steve sit down as he lay teetering on the verge of sleep. This had been a new experience for him all the way around. For one, he couldn't recall being so wretchedly ill before. For another, Janet and Steve's reasonably calm attitude towards the whole situation and the way they managed to split their time between the girls and himself were decidedly novel events.

He wondered fuzzily how he would have fared if they'd allowed him to return to the Leaky Cauldron, then decided not to dwell too deeply on that. At best he would have spent an uncomfortable night on the floor of the loo. At worst, well, things could have gotten...messy.

The flannel was back, this time folded and draped neatly on his forehead. "There. Now, let's try a little of this, what do you say?" Steve's disembodied voice coaxed, just before a now-familiar straw prodded his lower lip.

As he dutifully took a few small sips, Harry wondered absently what time it was. His off-again on-again dozing made it difficult to judge how long he'd been there. He thought about asking Steve, but it just seemed like too much effort. Besides, going by the sounds of the house and the street outside, it must be getting quite late. London was never completely still and silent but Harry had noticed a definite ebb and flow to peoples' comings and goings when he had been working nights at the Leaky Cauldron. The wee hours of the morning had always been the worst. That was when the relative quiet could get oppressive, and the slightest noise seemed to be amplified tenfold.

Of course this wasn't always a bad thing, Harry noted distantly, picking up the soft creak of the rocking chair and Janet's voice finishing Dr. Seuss' "What Was I Afraid Of" in the girls' room next door. She was reading about picking a peck of Snide. For some reason that part always reminded him of Professor Snape. The snarky git probably ate too much of it as a kid... he thought muzzily, shifting restlessly on the bed as the dull ache in his scar increased.

"Harry? What is it, bud?" Steve's voice asked uncertainly, as Harry uttered a small whimper and lifted his hand to his scar. "Is the rag warm?" he asked, quickly plucking the flannel off Harry's forehead and returning it cold-side down.

It helped a bit, but not nearly enough. The link was taut and humming with power. Harry cried out again and cursed his bad luck, as he began to perceive what Voldemort did, and what sounded like the babble of a small crowd echoed in his head. The last thing on Earth he wanted was for Steve and Janet to witness him having a full blown, no holds barred, scar episode.

"M'okay. Just...headache," he managed to gasp, before being borne away on a fresh wave of pain.

"Welcome my Death Eaters, in a few moments we shall begin this evening's festivities..."

"Puh. If you're okay, then I'm the King of Mesopotamia. Janet!" Steve called, making Harry wince then moan as his stomach lurched and prepared to rid itself of whatever bile had been manufactured in the last sixty minutes.

"Harry? Aw, jeez, kid, no..." Steve groaned, before heaving a resigned sigh, and helping Harry roll over to the side of the bed. "All right. C'mon. Get it over with."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"'Old Faithful' impression. Encore performance. Said his head hurts, too."

"Poor thing..."

Dimly aware of someone speaking softly to him and wiping his face, Harry squeezed his eyes shut, and poured all his flagging strength into the link. He couldn't lose the connection now that something big was going down! It was just so hard to focus, and he was so tired. He squeezed the hand that miraculously appeared in his as running footsteps faded into the distance then returned, then gasped in surprise as something very cold was pressed against his forehead.

"Ice?"

"Yeah. Unless you have a better idea. Easy kid. It's good for what ails you..."

"Ah, welcome, Severus. Crucio. Wormtail, take his wand. Lucius, distribute the potions."

Professor Snape! Harry thought in consternation, fear giving him enough energy to push out one last time and breach a barrier of some sort. Exhausted, he leaned over and put his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

"Jimmy--Harry? Harry? Can you hear me?" Janet asked, her frightened voice sounding very far away.

Startled, Harry opened his eyes and gasped. It happened again! he realized with a start, twisting around to see the silvery link in the small of his back. Concentrating, he could sense Steve and Janet trying to tend his now-unconscious body. Luckily, they didn't seem to be aware of the silvery link that was extending up from his physical self, anchoring him to it.

"I think he passed out. He's probably better off for now..."

Nodding, Harry shifted his focus from his physical body back to his current location. They were frightened and concerned, but far from panicked. He'd take a quick look 'round, figure out what Voldemort was up to, if he could, then get back straightaway.

There was some sort of commotion in the room adjoining the one he was in, so Harry drifted over to look. He still felt the drag of his unwell body to a certain extent, but he was much more clear-headed and alert now that he was away from it. Pausing to peek out a window, he tried to identify his location, but was unable to do so. It wasn't the ivy covered house, and it wasn't the shack from his last episode. Evidently Voldemort was fond of meeting in random locations instead of operating exclusively out of the manor house as Harry had first thought.

The room he found himself in was packed with people. Harry ran an eye over the crowd, noting with disgust that Bryce and Tammy, the two Lancaster employees who had quit suddenly, were among the new recruits. Gits, he thought a little contemptuously as he drifted by.

Voldemort, meanwhile, had positioned himself on a raised dais, clearly intending to address the assembly. Harry scanned the crowd, searching for his potions professor, and frowning when he saw four people who were obviously Muggles milling around with the rest of the crowd. Curious, he made his way over to them.

"Bit of a weird job, what?" one was saying as he approached.

Another shrugged, saying that the money was all that mattered.

Harry blinked as the enormity of the situation hit him. These Muggles weren't prisoners! They were part of the attack! While he was still trying to get his head around that, Mr. Malfoy approached.

"Here, you lot," he said brusquely, handing out what Harry knew to be Snape's potions. "When you are let into the house, your job will be to throw these at the walls," he said, handing out thin roughly ball-shaped bottles filled with blue liquid. "These," he continued, holding up a different set of bottles filled with an amber liquid, "contain an...accelerant. Meet us outside the structure when the job is done to collect the rest of your payment."

Harry was horrified at the implications, but the Muggle who seemed to be the leader merely acknowledged the instructions with a terse, "Right, guv."

Lucius nodded in return. "Wait here. We shall be leaving directly."

Voldemort seemed to have been waiting for Lucius to finish up, because as soon as Malfoy turned away from them in a swirl of flowing robes, he began to speak.

Whoa, Harry thought, amazed at how quickly all chatter ceased. Of course the fact that the speaker tended to cast the Cruciatus Curse on those that annoyed him probably had a lot to do with it.

"Tonight will mark a victory for us that will not soon be forgotten," he announced, raising his arms dramatically as he spoke.

Harry rolled his eyes. Blah blah blah, he thought impatiently as the dark wizard continued to expound on the upcoming attack. Get to the point, would you?

Listening to Voldemort with half an ear, he continued his search for Snape, finally spotting him and Wormtail over by the far wall. Snape didn't seem to have suffered any lasting damage from his recent ordeal, but his face was grim as he listened to the Dark Lord's speech. Pettigrew's attention was almost fully focused on the Slytherin Head of House. Harry looked at his parents' betrayer in disgust, a familiar ball of anger forming in his stomach. The rat's wand was out and held at the ready, and he looked like his nerves were strung about as tight as they could go. Personally, Harry reckoned he'd probably scream, faint, or wet himself if anyone so much as spoke to him. On the heels of that thought was the fleeting regret that he was currently unable to tap Pettigrew on the shoulder and say "Boo."

Wishing he had his pen and notepad, Harry carefully studied the room he was in and the faces of the people he could see, trying to internalize as many details as possible. He was concentrating so completely on his task, he nearly jumped out of his skin when Voldemort stopped talking, whipped out his wand and cried, "Stupefy," dropping the Muggles where they stood.

"I do not wish to employ crude Muggle transportation methods, but a deception is necessary to maintain the illusion," Voldemort proclaimed, stepping down off the dais and transfiguring a very good replica of a sedan in his place. "Put them in," he ordered, pointing his wand at the unconscious Muggles. "Tell them they fell asleep on the ride over when you revive them," he continued as several Death Eaters scrambled to obey. "That should suffice, but if it doesn't, kill them. There are more where these came from, and we can't risk Ministry involvement. I will plant the notion that they got into this vehicle in their minds," he lectured, firing several memory charms into the now-occupied vehicle, and making Harry's scar sting with each and every one. "There. They will think they slept through the trip," he stated, speaking to the Death Eaters surrounding him. "Keep them in this device when you revive them. I will turn it into a Portkey which will take them to your first target."

Harry couldn't help a self-satisfied smirk as he watched the Dark Lord making preparations. The look on Voldemort's face when this whole thing blew up in his face was almost going to be worth the headache his fury would generate later. They could reduce his aunt and uncle's former residence to smoking rubble for all he cared. He'd worried initially that some innocents might purchase the property at 4 Privet Drive and therefore be in harm's way, but according to some adverts he'd found in London, the property was still vacant.

So long, suckers, he thought derisively as Voldemort tapped the roof of the sedan and said, "Portus", making the car and all its occupants disappear with a pop.

That done Voldemort turned to issue some last minute instructions. Summoning a cloth-covered box, he motioned for his Death Eaters to gather 'round. Harry drifted nearer, as the dark wizard swept off the cover, and saw that the box was filled with various trinkets.

"These portkeys have been charmed to take you to the targets I have selected. To activate them, say 'Target One', and 'Target Two'," Voldemort instructed, catching Harry's attention. Two targets? I thought he was going to Privet Drive!

"When you finish, you will return here for your reward...or your punishment," the Dark Lord finished, grinning in a way that made Harry very nervous. He's nutters! Why would anyone willingly follow him? he wondered as the Death Eaters each took an item out of the box and said "Target One."

When they had all been whisked away, presumably to Surrey, Voldemort turned back to Pettigrew and Snape. "I'm sure you're wondering about your exclusion, Severus," he purred, taking the potion master's wand from Wormtail's nervous hand.

"I do not question my master's will," Snape replied with a respectful incline of his head. Harry was impressed in spite of himself at how calm the great git seemed.

"We shall see," was Volemort's comment, as he walked around the other two wizards. "There are some who question your loyalty, Severus. They do not dare speak it to my face, but it is there in the dark recesses of their minds. They consider you a liability and think you live in Dumbledore's pocket. That is why you are staying behind with Wormtail and myself."

"I am saddened that my master finds my loyalty lacking," Snape intoned, dropping to one knee. "How may I find favor once again?" His voice was still steady, but the tension in his shoulders and back said he was bracing for one of Voldemort's more painful "punishments." Harry grimaced, and tried to prepare as well, knowing he'd feel it too when Voldemort struck. He was just as surprised as Snape obviously was when Voldemort chuckled evilly, and gestured Snape back to his feet.

"Rise, Severus. This is merely a preventative measure. I can't run the risk of Dumbledore blundering in and ruining things. Come, sit," Voldemort invited, after transfiguring three comfortable chairs. "And just so you don't get any ideas, Petrificus Totalis. You will watch the festivities with Wormtail and me, and after, we will discuss your loyalties in detail. If my followers were mistaken, you may ask anything of them you desire as atonement for their foolishness, but if they are correct..." Voldemort paused and dropped his voice to a

toxic whisper. "You will beg for death long before I grant it to you. But for now, let the show begin."

I've stayed long enough, Harry decided frantically, trying to decide how to best warn Dumbledore as Voldemort sent Pettigrew scurrying to draw back a large red curtain. It wouldn't take the Death Eaters long to determine Privet Drive was a dead end. His attention was attracted for a second by the huge wall of glass that had been behind the curtain. Scrying mirror, he realized, recalling a section he'd stumbled across when he'd flipped through his new Divination text. He'd taken a casual interest in such things because of the mirrors Cassandra and her boyfriend Silas used to communicate, but they were nothing compared to this! In fact, specimens this large were comparatively rare because of the immense cost involved and...

Harry paused, blinking, then wiped his hand down the middle of his face. Get a grip, Potter, you're turning into bloody Hermione! So there's an expensive mirror on the wall! Deal with it! The issue is getting a message to the headmaster, but how...Hedwig! he decided, nodding. It was the only way. He'd have to rouse himself enough to write a note and send Hedwig to Dumbledore...after he figured out how to get back to his body, of course.

Yeah.

Sure.

No problem.

Could this get any worse? Harry groaned. He raked a hand through his hair, then immediately wished he'd kept his big mouth shut when a familiar house emerged from the depths of the scrying mirror...and it wasn't 4 Privet Drive.

Harry's heart which was already pounding, leapt into a mad gallop when he recognized the Burrow sitting peacefully and unsuspectingly in the starlight. By the looks of things, everyone was in for the night.

Panicking, Harry stared wildly at the mirror. I have to get to Dumbledore! I have to get to Dumbledore NOW! he thought frantically,

even as his head filled with a sound resembling static and the room he was in disappeared in a blinding flash of white. When he came back to himself, and the sparkles cleared from his vision, he found himself sprawled on the ground next to a pair of high heeled buckled boots, topped by a set of iridescent purple robes. Raising his head, he was caught by a pair of piercing blue eyes which were studying him in shocked concern. "Harry!"

Chapter 32: Now You See Me, Now You Don't
July 26, 1995

Harry closed his eyes in relief and let his head droop back to the floor. A horrible bone-numbing exhaustion washed over him but he didn't care.

He'd made it.

He didn't know why, he wasn't sure how, but he'd done it.

He'd found Professor Dumbledore.

Am I at Hogwarts? he wondered, frowning when he became aware of worried voices babbling above him.

"What on Earth--?"

"Albus, what are you doing down there?"

"Good Lord, has something happened?"

"Gently now, don't overwhelm him," Dumbledore cautioned, effectively silencing the others. "Harry? Harry lad? Are you with us?"

"Sort of," Harry mumbled, wondering belatedly what on Earth he'd done to himself. A shock ran through him as he struggled to prop himself up on his elbows and noticed his forearms seemed to be in a state of flux. One second they were translucent--more so even than the ghosts at Hogwarts--the next they were so transparent he could hardly see them at all.

Worse yet was a new and unwelcome sensation of something pulling on him--dragging him back. With an eerie sense of déjà vu, Harry forcibly recalled the end of the Second Task--kicking desperately toward the surface of Hogwarts Lake while fighting to overcome Ron and Gabrielle's combined deadweight--but this time there was no water to push against, no clear goal in sight, and he had no idea how or even if he could overcome it.

Before he could panic, Dumbledore spoke, his voice gently commanding. "Concentrate, Harry. Push forward. Visualize yourself here with me," the old wizard instructed, somehow seeming to know what Harry was experiencing.

Ready to try about anything at this point, Harry ground his teeth together and did as he was told. The end result was pretty pathetic looking, and he still felt like he was barely hanging on by his fingernails, but at least he wasn't phasing in and out anymore. When he finally felt stable enough to raise his head, he found himself nose to beak with Fawkes the Phoenix. Professor Dumbledore was kneeling just beyond the firebird, keeping several witches and wizards back with a sternly upraised hand.

Mindful of his errand and frankly unsure how long he could hold out, Harry met Dumbledore's worried gaze. "Professor...go t'the Burrow! Go now!" he warned, trying to convey as much urgency as possible. He waited expectantly for Dumbledore to spring into action, but the old wizard just frowned and shook his head, a puzzled look crossing his lined face.

"Borrow? You need to borrow something?" he guessed, before abruptly switching gears. "No! Wait, Harry! Push forward!" he called, an unaccustomed note of urgency in his voice.

Nonplused, Harry watched as Dumbledore braced himself on the floor with one hand, and reached out with the other, as though trying to make a grab for him. Instinctively he reached out to touch the older wizard's hand, breaking off with a gasp as his concentration slipped and he lost a little ground to the pulling. Reapplying himself he focused on staying where he was and managed to re-stabilize himself--or so he thought. He could still see Dumbledore, who was looking uncharacteristically bleak, but for some reason his headmaster no longer seemed able to see or hear him.

Confused, Harry waved a hand in front of Dumbledore's face. "I'm here, Professor! I'm right here!" he called, willing himself closer. For a second, it seemed to work. Dumbledore's face lit up with a relieved twinkle and smile. Seeing this, Harry tried again to warn him before his strength gave out entirely.

"The Burrow!" he urged as his vision began to blur, and the pulling sensation became almost impossible to resist. He glanced up hoping that he'd managed to convey his message, and nearly howled in frustration when Dumbledore shook his head and lifted his hands in a pose of helpless confusion. He wasn't going to be able to do this much longer. The effort required was simply more than he was capable of at the moment.

"I can't understand--Fawkes!" Dumbledore blurted, snapping his fingers as though remembering something and turning to the phoenix beside him. "Fawkes! Help him!"

The firebird favored Dumbledore with an indignant look before leveling his penetrating stare on Harry. I sense division in you, fledgling, he observed, tilting his head to one side. You may return to your body without speaking to my human if you do not wish to do so.

Growing giddy from exertion, Harry shook his head and reached out a desperate hand. "No! Please Fawkes," he managed between pants, "I have to warn him!"

Fawkes seemed to consider this for a very long time before nodding gravely. Very well, fledgling. Harry managed to hang on long enough to see the scarlet and gold bird start toward him, then his vision grayed completely and he felt himself begin to fall.

The dim image of four men moving through tall grass and weeds scintillated in the depths of the mirror. A wave and murmured Auditis and the voices of the men drifted from the crystal surface, tinny and rather high-pitched.

"Blimey, what a wreck! Looks like the whole thing could go any second."

"And yeh were expectin' what, lad? A fine summer cottage by the sea?"

"Wouldn't be the first time, old man."

"A cheery blaze will improve it, wot?"

"Settle down, you lot, and mind those torches. His Nibs says it's time to go in."

"About bloody time! What took so long?"

"Meh. Addin' more bloody bottles to the supply box."

"Those? But they're empty!"

"Pears so, don't it? We're to place them around the house and chuck a couple up the stairs."

"What? The old boy's barking!"

"Have to agree with yeh there."

"Look, I just repeat the orders. I don't explain them."

"That's one cold fish, that one. Don't trust him a'tall."

"Don't have to, wot?"

"Aye. Stop yer whinin'. Yeh have to do a job, not be his best mate."

"But--"

"Pipe down! He wants empty bottles scattered about that's what he'll get. Now spread out and check the doors and windows. Sooner it's over, sooner we can go back to the pub for a pint."

The thugs did as they were told, although with varying degrees of enthusiasm. When they separated, the scene in the mirror split in two to follow them.

"Oi! This window's open!"

"Now you're talkin'! Still, don't suppose anyone would bother lockin' up a place like this."

"GAH! What's that?"

"It's a bird, you bloody pillock!"

"Hah! Fancy bein' scared of that tiny thing!"

"I'll show you who's scared!"

"Ease off, it's gone now."

"All right you lot, once we spread the Petrol, the fumes'll be thick. Work from the inside back toward this window or the door, understand? Hey now! No yawning!"

"Sorry boss. Still groggy from the ride over, I reckon. Blue's for the walls?"

"Blue's for the walls, yellow's for the fl-floor...blimey...now you got me doing it. Here now. Take some bottles and get to work."

The watcher nodded, a little sneer twisting his lips. The Dark Lord's plan was genius, but his own modification would add a bit of personal insurance--especially since he was saddled with Muggles and untried dunderheads. He continued tracking the Muggles' progress, frowning in annoyance when the ghostly image of a cloaked figure overlaid the scene in the mirror. Irritated, he spared a quick glance at the trainee who was bending down to speak into the window of his classic Mercedes-Benz.

"Mr. Malfoy?"

Lucius reacted instantly, glaring thorough his Deatheater mask and jamming the tip of his wand against the intruder's throat.

"Quiet, idiot! No names! Forget again and I'll leave your corpse here as a warning to the others!"

"S-sorry, sir," the trainee squeaked. "The Muggles are inside," he offered, clearly trying to placate his superior.

"Yes, I am aware. We shouldn't have to wait much longer," Lucius said, with an air of dismissal. When the other wizard didn't move, he glared up at him again. "Was there something else?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but a few of us were wondering, why are we going to all this trouble?"

"Trouble?" Malfoy's silken voice held a subtle threat.

The unlucky spokeswizard must have heard, because he swallowed audibly and looked less sure of himself before inquiring, "Well...yes sir. The Ministry isn't watching over this house like Potter's, are they? We shouldn't be in danger of tripping any alarms."

"Ah, I see. No, the Ministry isn't monitoring this property, but Weasley, along with being a Muggle-lover, is known to be associated with Albus Dumbledore. The Dark Lord chose to proceed with caution based on that fact."

"Oh. V-very wise of him, s-sir. Very wise indeed."

"Hmm. There may be hope for you after all, provided you survive your training period. The Dark Lord has little patience for those who question his orders. Be grateful I am more forgiving."

"Th-thank you, sir. S-shall we watch for the Muggles coming back out, then?"

"What makes you think they're coming back out?"

The junior Death eater hesitated for a long moment. "Erm, nothing, sir. N-nothing at all."

"Very good. Tell the others to get into position. As soon as the Muggles finish spreading the potions, it will be time to make our move," Malfoy ordered, allowing himself a cruel smile when the trainee fled.

"What is this? What do they think they're doing? "

Severus Snape, grateful now for the full body bind the Dark Lord had cast on him, dedicated all his concentration to keeping his mind perfectly blank while his master stalked over to the scrying mirror and tapped it with his wand.

Malfoy appeared in a small section in the lower left quadrant, just barely in Severus' line of vision. "I specifically told you to use the paralyzing gas at the next target," Voldemort growled in his best "This Better Be Good" voice, gesturing irritably at the wall.

Unable to make out Malfoy's reply, Snape frowned inwardly, trying to discern his "colleague's" intentions. He was privy to the "public" part of the Dark Lord's plan, but he didn't know all of the particulars. Not that it mattered. Lucius had obviously deviated a bit, but to what purpose? Only a fool invited the Dark Lord's wrath, and Lucius Malfoy, whatever else he might be, was no fool.

Turning his full attention back to the mirror, Snape watched the Muggles. The empty-looking bottles they were tossing about weren't the ones he had filled with paralyzing gas. Those would have immobilized them on the spot. Judging from the Muggles' progressively slower movements and the frequency of their yawns, it seemed to be a gradual sleep agent.

Snape considered that, raising a mental eyebrow. The Dark Lord clearly wasn't expecting trouble on this mission, but he supposed Lucius could be taking a few extra precautions if he thought he could get away with it. The group Malfoy was leading had little to no experience, but their trainee status would only go so far in deflecting the Dark Lord's displeasure if something went wrong.

Still, Severus was having trouble believing Malfoy was afraid. True, Weasley's brats were clever enough when they bothered to apply themselves, and Molly could probably take out a trainee or two with the power of her voice alone, but the whole family was asleep. Further, they weren't expecting trouble. Taken unawares they should pose no real threat, so why the sleeping agent? Snape grappled with the maddening feeling he was overlooking something as Voldemort walked back to his seat and Malfoy faded out of sight. He couldn't

help noticing that the Dark Lord was looking very pleased about something.

"Will Malfoy be punished, Master?" Pettigrew wondered hopefully, making Snape want to groan and roll his eyes. It was amazing how the man's so called "Gryffindor Courage" manifested itself in an appalling inability to keep his mouth shut. With Voldemort, it was far better to gain knowledge by observation--a lesson the smaller wizard seemed incapable of learning.

As though to prove Snape's point, Voldemort turned on Wormtail, making the little man cringe and throw up his hands in an unconscious gesture of defense. "Punished? I think not. Lucius has engineered an opportunity for our new trainees that I admit I did not see."

"H-he did, Master?" Pettigrew squeaked, glancing involuntarily at the mirror where the Muggles had begun smashing bottles of ward weakener against one living room wall, and pouring the highly flammable firebomb fluid on the floors.

Voldemort nodded, smiling a vicious smile. "Indeed. Tonight we shall discover if they are worthy of the name Death Eater."

Snape felt his stomach drop. He had been away too long. He had forgotten what it was like to serve under Voldemort and win his favor. Obviously Lucius had not.

Killing was not as easy as some people seemed to think. Many a new recruit had frozen at a critical moment. By the time Severus had been initiated, it had become something of a tradition to test a new Death Eater's taste for blood by ordering them to kill a helpless target. Lucius was actually killing two birds with one stone.

No wonder the Dark Lord looks so pleased! Snape had assumed, foolishly perhaps, that the Weasleys would be awakened when the attack began. There might be some casualties, but it was equally likely that they might get out, or have sense enough to run for help. Molly could apparate, and if he wasn't mistaken, the twins could as well.

If the entire family was in a drugged sleep...well, that put a whole new slant on things. Realistically, their chance of survival was practically zero.

Malfoy was taking out insurance all right, but it was for himself, not the mission. Now, no matter what happened at the Burrow, he would be essentially blameless. He had simply set things up. How well the trainees performed was on them.

Sighing inwardly, Snape groped desperately for a flaw, but found nothing obvious. It was a well laid plan, he conceded, his frustration tinged with a certain grudging admiration. Unfortunately, it practically ensured Arthur Weasley would lose his home and most of his family tonight. Bound and observed as he was now, there was absolutely nothing Severus could do about it. Indeed, at the moment, his own survival was far from assured. If this plan went off without a hitch and the Dark Lord condemned him as a traitor...

Stop! Snape growled inwardly, cutting that line of thinking off before it could go anywhere. This situation is not hopeless, he reminded himself. As long as the Dark Lord harbored some doubts he had a chance. Throwing up a mental wall, he worked on keeping one side carefully blank while thinking furiously behind it. Pettigrew had taken his wand, but he still had his little vial of poison. He sincerely hoped it wouldn't come to that, but he had an out if he needed it. The Dark Lord would have to release him from the body bind if he expected him to answer any questions--or wanted to hear him scream and beg. That was all the opportunity he would require.

Contingency plan firmly in place, Severus started working on less... permanent ...alternatives. There had to be another way, but try as he might, he couldn't think of it. This information needed to be acted upon now and at present, he was silenced. Even if the Dark Lord released him, by the time he could reasonably manage to get back and report it would be far, far, too late. Snape had always disparaged partners as an unnecessary liability, but he had to admit some backup would have been useful tonight.

Ironically, now that the Dark Lord had shifted his focus away from Potter himself, he might have hit upon the best way to hurt the boy. Snape considered this, watching clinically as the Muggles began to succumb to the fumes in the house. Weasley was obviously target one, and he was prepared to bet Granger was target two. If Diggory's death was anything to go by, this could be a crippling loss for Potter. Voldemort might as well choke off two of the boy's major arteries. In fact, it might be kinder if he did--

Wait! Potter!

Growling inwardly, Snape quickly masked the sudden wild hope that bloomed in his chest. Perhaps the situation wasn't lost after all. He didn't pretend to understand the mechanics behind it, but Potter had managed to gather some information from the Dark Lord this summer. He'd seen it himself in the boy's letters to Albus. It was a long shot, but then the little brat had also survived a Basilisk bite... If Potter could warn Dumbledore in time...

Snape winced inwardly, once again cutting off his line of thought with savage swiftness. He would have sneered in profound disgust at the absurd direction his musings had taken if he'd been able to move his mouth. Further, if someone had told him this morning that he'd be actively pulling for Potter to save the day yet again through sheer dumb luck he would have personally admitted them into St. Mungo's for rest and observation.

On the other hand, at this point it was Potter or nothing. As much as it rankled, all Snape could do was mentally cross his fingers and hope for the best. I hope you're watching now, boy, he thought, as he stared blankly at the scrying mirror, for Weasley's sake as well as your own.

Unfortunately, at that moment, Harry was still losing ground despite his efforts to halt or at least slow his backwards slide. Wind teased his hair and ran cold fingers across his scalp, while a gray mist closed in on all sides, cloaking any potential hand or footholds.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Harry clenched his fists, trying to figure out how to turn off or at least cope with this new dynamic. Before, when he'd been observing Voldemort, he'd actually been rather stationary

until he decided he wanted to go somewhere. This bloody backwards pulling was making any attempt at mental control worse than useless.

"Stop!" he finally railed, swinging his fists at the misty nothingness that surrounded him. "Stop, damn it! Stop! STOP!"

Peace, fledgling. Be calm.

"F-Fawkes?" Harry stopped his blind shadowboxing and looked up, hardly daring to believe it when warm talons closed on his wrist. "Fawkes!" he said gratefully when the phoenix began to beat his wings, slowing, then stopping his backwards motion. "Fawkes, please! Professor Dumbledore! The Burrow!"

Hush, young one. Conserve your strength, Fawkes counseled, adjusting his grip on Harry's wrist so he was facing forward again, then towing him back in the direction they had come from. Or at least Harry hoped it was the direction they had come from. If your need is so great, you shall speak to my human.

Pacified, Harry tried to obey, but their progress seemed agonizingly slow and it was hard not to fidget impatiently. Fawkes was pulling against the same force that was trying to draw him backwards, but still! This was the same bird that had pulled Ron, Ginny, Lockhart, and himself out of the Chamber of Secrets without any noticeable strain.

Patience, fledgling. I may go no faster without the risk of damage to your astral link. Fawkes remarked, making Harry wonder guiltily if his thoughts were entirely private in his current state.

Then he registered what the bird had said.

"Excuse me, did you say, 'damage'?" he asked, hoping against hope that he'd misunderstood.

I did. The Astral Plane is not a place where younglings may frolic unattended, Fawkes informed him sternly. My human is rather talented in this area--much more so than the Melodramatic One he employs. When you are strong again, he and I will tutor you.

Harry frowned as Fawkes' words tickled a memory. "Melodramatic? Astral...oh of course! How could I be so stupid?" Harry exclaimed, as the maddening feeling that he should know this from somewhere finally made sense.

Professor Trelawney! Harry hit his forehead with his free hand. Astral Theory was one of her pet topics. Technically it wasn't in Harry's current Divination curriculum, but if she finished her lesson early and had a few minutes to fill, she liked to talk about Astral Projection--or more precisely the gruesome fates which could befall unwary travelers.

Harry shivered a little, suddenly wishing he'd paid more attention. Since Astral Theory was extraneous information and not included in homework assignments, practicals, or exams he'd let the information drift in one ear and out the other. The only reason he remembered this much was because he and Ron had found the idea intriguing. Astral Travel wouldn't do when one's hands were needed, like sneaking into the kitchen for example, but both of them had thought it might be dead useful for exploring, nicking answers off Hermione's homework papers, or maybe even copping a peek in the girls' dorm.

Sighing, Harry pulled his thoughts back to the present. Neither of them had taken the matter very seriously. It had simply been an enjoyable way to spend some time. Now it looked like the subject had more merit than Harry had given it credit for...assuming the old fraud knew what she was talking about for a change.

Her tales are a trifle overdone but there is truth in them, Fawkes commented, snapping the straw Harry was grasping.

Brilliant. Feeling a bit shaken, Harry swallowed tightly, involuntarily glancing over his shoulder at the mystical rope behind him. Before, there had been a certain amount of slack in it, and it had stretched back toward the horizon with a gentle undulating motion. Now it was taut as a bowstring--and the tension was increasing steadily.

Harry forced his gaze forward again with a shudder, as the image of a rubber band stretched to the snapping point teased his mind's eye.

"No one's ever been able to see me before," he ventured at length, trying to gather his tattered wits and get his mind on other things.

You have never crossed over into the Physical Realm from the Astral Realm before.

"Sorry?"

Astral Forms are not normally visible in the Physical Realm, Fawkes supplied patiently. Humans who possess the strength and will may overcome the limitation for brief periods, but it is not an easy task. I believe you discovered this for yourself just now.

Harry grimaced recalling the debilitating exhaustion he'd experienced. "Does it ever get easier?"

In time, fledgling, in time.

"Time? But I need Professor Dumbledore to understand me now!" Harry blurted in an unreasoning swell of panic. "I could barely get three words out before!"

Fawkes didn't reply immediately with words. Instead, he opened his beak and sang a soothing note. Harry felt his eyes close and his body relax as the music flowed around him. When Fawkes finally spoke, his tone was mildly reproving. I promised you would speak to my human, fledgling. I am taking you to him as we speak. What further assurances do you require?

"I...nothing Fawkes," Harry replied meekly, feeling like the most insufferable prat living. "Thank you. I promise I'll be quick."

You are kind, fledgling, but I must point out, you are in more peril than I at the moment.

Harry wasn't sure he liked the sound of that, but rather than risk insulting Fawkes again he decided to change the subject.

"Are you a projection too?" he wondered, glancing curiously at the solid-seeming talons encircling his translucent wrist. "Is that why you can touch me?"

I am Phoenix, Fawkes replied as though that explained everything. I am simply governed by a different set of rules. You shall learn about that in the fullness of time. For now listen closely. We are almost there.

Immediately at attention Harry nodded, watching as the misty grayness began to resolve itself into definite shapes. Before long he was able to recognize Mrs. Figg's living room, with its crocheted afghans and many cats. When he could almost hear what the people inside were saying, Fawkes came to a halt, beating his wings to hover rather than push forward. "Erm, why are we stopping, Fawkes?"

Shifting his grip on Harry's wrist again, the firebird turned to face him. We are about to cross over into the Physical Realm, fledgling. The force you feel drawing you back is your body's summons. I will get you as close as I can for as long as I can, but eventually you must return or risk not being able to do so. Do you understand?

Harry nodded again, wishing that the firebird would just go already. "I understand. Please hurry, Fawkes. It's very important."

As you wish, fledgling.

As they neared, Harry noticed his headmaster was having problems of his own. Professor Dumbledore, now seated in one of Mrs. Figg's comfortable armchairs, was surrounded by a knot of worried-looking witches and wizards. If the situation hadn't been so serious, Harry might have snickered at the look on Dumbledore's face as he waved off warm blankets, reassuring pats, and hot cups of tea from Mrs. Figg, Professor McGonagall, and Mr. Weasley, while Mad-Eye Moody and a pink-haired witch Harry didn't recognize, looked on from the side.

"Why don't you get some rest, Albus," Moody finally suggested, carefully studying Dumbledore with his good eye, while his magical

one moved restlessly in its socket. "We can manage without you for a bit."

"I know what I saw, Alastor." Dumbledore's words were mild enough, but the look he threw the old Auror held a touch of impatience. As Harry watched, wondering how long it would take him to become visible again, Dumbledore caught his eye and smiled an enigmatic smile. "In fact, if you'd be good enough to turn around, you can see him too."

"What are you on about--bloody hell!" Moody exclaimed in surprise, drawing everyone's attention. Here we go, Harry sighed in resignation, already anticipating the inevitable flood of questions and reprimands as the group surged forward and clustered around him.

"Well done Fawkes, very well done indeed!" Dumbledore congratulated the firebird, while McGonagall focused her attention on Harry.

"What on Earth are you doing, Potter?" she questioned anxiously. "Do you have the first idea how risky self projection can be?"

Harry shook his head and lifted his free hand in a pacifying gesture. "Professor! Professor please listen!" he broke in urgently, overriding McGonagall and heading off the others before they could start. "Professor Dumbledore! Go to the Burrow! You need to go to the Burrow now!"

Dead silence met his announcement for perhaps two or three heartbeats, then the room exploded with frightened questions and stern demands for him to explain himself immediately. The hubbub rose to such a degree Professor Dumbledore had to fire several sparklers from the end of his wand, making his companions jump, and Mrs. Figg's cats dive for cover.

"What about the Burrow, Harry?" he asked, his quiet voice unnaturally loud in the resulting silence. Harry quailed a bit in spite of himself. This Dumbledore was dead serious and not at all like the good humored, slightly dotty headmaster he was more accustomed to dealing with.

"Voldemort just sent some of his Death Eaters there!" Harry replied urgently, making anxious little flapping gestures with his free hand. "They have Muggles with them! They'll get through the wards! Please! You have to go and stop them!"

Dumbledore immediately drew what appeared to be a large pocket watch out of his robes and peered at it intently before shaking his head and turning to Mr. Weasley. "Arthur?" When Harry glanced over, he saw Mr. Weasley was consulting a similar device, holding it in trembling hands.

"The wards aren't picking up anything unusual," Mr. Weasley confirmed after a few tense seconds. "Are you sure, Harry?" he asked, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbing at his brow.

"Yes!" Harry asserted. When only Mr. Weasley glanced nervously at the fireplace, he frowned and tried a different tack. "You can't go by those!" he pleaded, pointing to the devices Professor Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley still held in their hands. "The wards won't help!"

"Harry, I assure you, the wards on the Burrow are quite sensitive. I placed several of them myself," Dumbledore said in his most pacifying tone, clearly considering the matter settled. "We would know if anything was amiss."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and felt his patience shatter. "It doesn't matter who set the wards!" he roared, making the assembly in front of him draw back in surprise. "Don't you get it? If they can't detect Muggles they're useless!"

Dead silence.

Again.

Harry raked an agitated hand through his hair and wondered pettishly how otherwise intelligent people could be so thick. They were lost. Clueless. Completely dumbfounded. Clamping down hard on his temper he took a deep breath and tried again.

"Voldemort is using Muggles to get inside without activating the wards," he explained, enunciating very carefully and precisely. "Once inside, they're supposed to scatter potions about."

That broke Moody out of his paralysis, but his reaction wasn't promising. "Snake Face use Muggles? Don't be daft, boy!" he scoffed, making Harry bristle like a spitting cat.

"Wait Alastor," Dumbledore cautioned, holding up a hand and frowning in concentration. "The potion, Harry, what color was it?" he questioned abruptly, drawing Harry up short.

"Erm, I saw two...a blue one, and a yellow one. They're supposed to throw the blue on the walls and pour the yellow one on the floor. Why? What's wrong sir?" he asked in alarm when Dumbledore swore softly under his breath and fired five silvery spells out the window.

"Alastor, Arthur, summon the others...no Arthur! Not alone!" Dumbledore commanded, but Mr. Weasley was no longer listening. As Harry watched, he broke away from the main group and made a dive for Mrs. Figg's fireplace, scooping up Floo Powder and shouting "The Burrow!" as he went.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then shook his head irritably and continued issuing orders. "Minerva, cover him until the others catch up to you! Severus was ordered to brew ward weakeners, firebombs, paralyzing gas, and Veritaserum so be on your guard! Arabella! Help Alastor! Tonks! Go to the Ministry and alert the Aurors. Summon the fire brigade as well."

As the gathered witches and wizards scrambled to carry out their assigned tasks, Dumbledore turned to Harry. "As for you, Mr. Potter," he said, raising an eyebrow at the young man who was still dangling from Fawkes' talon, "I want to know as much as you can tell me about what Voldemort is up to, and how you found yourself in your current...situation."

Arthur Weasley tumbled out of the Burrow's main fireplace, wand at the ready and all senses on high alert. Listening intently, he tried to identify any unfamiliar sounds or voices, but there were none. Even

the ghoul was silent. Automatically, he sought out the luminous face of the locator clock, sagging in relief when he saw Molly and the children's hands all pointing calmly at "Home" with his own on the way to join them. The only thing out of the ordinary was a faint, slightly acrid odor in the air, but then again Fred and George had been "inventing" all summer. Most likely it was the result of their antics, and there would be new "products" to show in the morning.

Or rather, for Molly to confiscate.

Torn between exasperation and thankfulness, Arthur pocketed his wand and released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, as the obvious answer occurred to him. A nightmare. Harry must have been dreaming, poor lad. He was clearly still frightened out of his wits about You Know Who, and probably missing Ron as well.

He turned back to the fireplace, then froze with his hand hovering indecisively over the Floo Powder. As long as I'm here, it won't hurt to have a quick look 'round, Arthur decided, shaking his head as he tried to puzzle through Harry's behavior of late. Why hadn't he just agreed to come to the Burrow a few nights ago? If he had, perhaps this could have been avoided. If not, then at least he would have had someone nearby when he awakened.

"Arthur?" someone called from somewhere in the vicinity of his feet. Arthur jumped before his brain caught up with him and he recognized Minerva's voice. Peering into the hearth, he saw the Transfiguration professor's head looking up at him. Minerva looked immensely relieved, then became all business once again. "Stand clear, I'm coming through," she warned in her best no-nonsense voice.

Arthur grimaced, realizing the extent of his own folly. Charging in here alone probably wasn't the brightest thing he'd ever done. Had Harry been correct, he could have found himself horribly outnumbered, but blast it all! It wasn't always easy for a wizard to think clearly when his home and family were at risk!

I'd better get out of the way, he thought, taking a few confident steps forward. Thanks to all the odd hours he'd worked over the years, he was quite accustomed to moving about in near darkness. Molly

helped, too, by making sure the floor was always clear, so Arthur was taken by complete surprise when his foot caught on something solid. His surprised gasp quickly turned into a howl of pain when he threw out both hands to catch himself, and wound up with two palms full of shattered glass for his trouble.

Minerva must have heard him. He caught sight of her familiar silhouette for a second before the flames died, her stance tense and rigid. "Arthur? Arthur! Lumos!" she called, anxiety making her Scottish burr more pronounced than usual.

Arthur grimaced again, this time in pain. "I'm here," he answered, lifting a cut and bleeding hand to shade his eyes from the strength of her spell.

"For Heaven's sake, Arthur! What happened?" Minerva demanded, more glass crunching under her feet as she hurried over to him.

Arthur was still trying to get his eyes to open properly. "I don't know, there were no indications...even the clock...and Good Lord!" he gasped, when his eyes cleared and he really looked at his living room for the first time.

"Yes, I'd say that covers it," Minerva agreed grimly, while Arthur surveyed the mess in open-mouthed dismay. Empty potion vials, both shattered and intact littered the floor. Four Muggles, including the one he'd tripped on, lay unconscious--seemingly dropped in their tracks. A viscous blue fluid bubbled and fizzed on one wall, and the floor was criss-crossed with wet trails of a yellowish substance. Now that he was on the floor, Arthur could identify that as the source of the smell he'd noticed earlier.

He was right! Dear Lord, he was right! Arthur gibbered, turning his hands over and staring blankly as the yellow potion burned its way into the cuts on his palms. He barely noticed Minerva's banishing charm or the hiss and clink of sliding glass, blinking only when fingers snapped uncomfortably close to his face.

"Stay with me, Arthur," McGonagall admonished, studying him with a little frown on her face. "Potter's warning was timely but we have to

hurry. Albus said this attack force is heavily armed with Severus' potions. It looks like they poured firebomb fluid on the floor and concentrated the ward weakener on the east wall," she said, indicating the large blue splotch with her wand.

"Oh, did they now?" Furious, Arthur gripped his wand as best he could. "Scourgify!" he snarled, throwing a cleaning spell at the mess on the wall, but to his irritation it didn't even make a dent.

"No, Arthur!" Minerva, said, holding up a hand. "Arthur, listen to me!" she shouted when he fired another spell over her shoulder. "We don't have the tools or the time to get the potion off the wall. The wards will most likely be breached. We have to wake Molly and the children and get them out now!"

"But the Burrow--"

"May be a loss!" she snapped impatiently. Seeing his heartbroken expression, she added more gently, "Arthur, Albus is sending help as fast as he can! We'll do everything possible to save your home, but if worse comes to worse the house can be repaired or replaced! Your family can't!"

Arthur opened his mouth to argue, then shut it again and nodded as sanity began to return. What was he thinking? She was right. There was no time to waste. "You're right Minerva, " I don't know what came over me..." he said, trailing off when he staggered woozily. "Sorry...dizzy..."

"It's quite all right, Arthur, you've had a shock," McGonagall said, hiding a yawn behind her hand. "Oh, do forgive me," she apologized, looking horrified.

Arthur shook his head, dismissing her concern with a wave. She was exhausted--they both were. "Not at all," he said, gesturing toward the stairs. The sooner they got Molly and the kids out the better. "It's beyond me why no one came down to see what all the commotion was about, though."

Minerva shrugged. "Let's not question it. With luck we'll be able to get the children out of the house without them being the wiser--" she said breaking off with a startled yelp when something hit the Burrow with a colossal WHUMP, knocking them both off their feet and shaking the house down to its foundation.

Oh, that's done it, Arthur groaned inwardly, struggling to get back to his feet. Any second he expected to hear sleepy, confused voices and footsteps on the stairs.

Minerva seemed to be thinking along the same lines. Raising her voice she called for Molly and the children to come to them, but still no one appeared.

By now they had reached Ginny's room. Frightened, Arthur flung the door open, about half expecting to see his youngest child murdered in her bed, but by all appearances she was sleeping peacefully. Swearing softly, he gripped the doorframe as another wave of dizziness washed over him, followed by a huge yawn. "Ginny!" he called, "Ginny, love, wake up!" Turning his shouted up the stairwell, "Fred! George! Molly! Ron!"

"Arthur!" McGonagall called from below, as another spell pounded the house. When Arthur turned back toward the foot of the stairs, he saw her looking anxiously up at him, one hand on the wall for support. "The Muggles are all unconscious! Albus mentioned paralyzing gas, but this looks more like a sleep agent," she informed him, starting shakily up the stairs. "We'll have to get Molly and the children out one by one!"

Arthur paled, clinging to the doorframe as the most savage blow yet shook the house. "Minerva...I feel...I'm not certain I can Apparate!" he confessed.

"Nor I," McGonagall replied, drawing her wand and trying a Bubble-head Charm with no success. "We'll have to use our portkeys," she decided, drawing her phoenix pendent out of her summer robes. "Hurry! We haven't much time!"

Nodding, Arthur staggered through Ginny's door, while Minerva shifted into her cat form and, dashed up to the next landing. "Hey."

Startled out of a light doze, Janet Wright yelped and sat straight up in her chair, nearly falling out of it in the process. Recovering, she glanced guiltily at the still form beside her, then gave her husband a sheepish smile. "Hey yourself."

Steve raised an eyebrow at her. "You should go to bed," he chided, coming over to stand behind her chair. "You're going to be miserable tomorrow."

Janet grimaced, knowing he was right, then closed her eyes and sighed contentedly when he reached out and began to gently massage her neck and shoulders. "You have five years to stop that, just in case you're wondering," she commented, leaning back into his hands.

"Might take that long to get you straightened out. You have a knot back here the size of my fist," Steve grumbled, gripping her shoulders more firmly and working the tense muscles with his thumbs. After a few minutes he stopped and dropped a kiss on the side of her neck. "Come on, babe, you're wiped. The kids are all sleeping now. We should get some rest while we can."

Janet sighed and crossed her arms. "I know," she acknowledged, but shook her head when he came around to face her, and tried to urge her to her feet. "I'll come to bed soon--I promise. I just...I just want to make sure everything's okay."

"Jannie..." Steve wiped a hand down the middle of his face then tried again. "Jannie, he's been sleeping for two solid hours now. Hasn't moved once."

"Yes, I know. That's what's worrying me," Janet admitted, leaning forward and reaching out a hand...yes. It was still there. Stronger, too. She didn't even have to touch Harry's skin now. The air above the mark on his forehead seemed to crackle and pulse with energy, like a magnetic field or a patch of static electricity. "Look at my arm. See

how the hair's standing on end? There's something really weird going on here," she said, watching as Steve frowned and stretched out his hand to join hers, and smiling in spite of herself when he jerked back with a curse.

"What is that?" he asked, shaking his arm a bit before smoothing the hair back down.

Janet shook her head. "I don't know." Reaching out again, she thumbed open one of Harry's eyelids, trying not to shudder at his complete unresponsiveness. He might as well have been made of wax. Taking her hand back, she shrugged helplessly. "It's creepy...like he just isn't in there," she said, watching as Steve knelt by the mattress.

He extended a hand, as though to feel Harry's forehead, then hesitated and laid the back of his hand on Harry's cheek instead. Janet couldn't claim to be surprised. Steve had quite a bit more body hair than she did. He'd probably felt the tingle all the way to his toes.

"He's still warm."

"Yes, his fever still hasn't broken," Janet agreed, watching as Steve followed the path she had earlier--fingers going straight from Harry's face to his carotid artery.

"Nice strong pulse...even breathing...doesn't seem to be in pain..."

Janet nodded again. "His color's good, too, all things considered." She indicated her home medical guide which was laying on the floor by her chair. "The book gives a list of things to watch out for with prolonged unconsciousness, but they don't seem to apply in this case."

Steve sat back on his heels and looked up at her, a puzzled frown on his face. "Okay, I give up. Does he need to go to the hospital or not?"

That was the same question Janet had been asking herself over and over again. "I don't know, Steve. I don't even know if this is something a normal hospital could cope with."

"Well if there are magical pubs and schools there must be magical hospitals, too," Steve pointed out. "Maybe we should go ask Tom what to do."

"Do you think that didn't occur to me?" Janet snapped in annoyance. "I was going to go wake Tom and ask his advice, but that bird got all weirded out and wouldn't let me out of the room."

"Hedwig?"

"Yeah." Janet crossed her arms again and glanced reproachfully at the snowy owl. She was fully aware that the pose made her look like a pouting child, but at the moment she was beyond caring.

Hedwig was significantly calmer than she had been earlier, but Janet noted she was still watching them carefully, as though hanging on their every word. "I made the mistake of thinking out loud," she told Steve. "As soon as she knew what I was up to, she flew over and blocked the doorway. Wouldn't move until I promised not to go--stupid as that might sound."

She'd half expected Steve to laugh at her for allowing herself to be bullied by an owl, but he surprised her, rubbing at the short beard on jaw and taking the matter very seriously. "Maybe she's concerned about him being caught out in a public place--as himself, I mean, and not Jim," he suggested. "You saw what happened with that reporter in the Leaky Cauldron. These magical folk seem a tad high strung where their 'Boy Who Lived' is concerned."

Janet started to say that Steve was giving a bird an awful lot of credit, then reconsidered. Hedwig had been touchingly protective of Harry since her arrival, and barring that one instance, she hadn't interfered with either Steve or herself as they tried to tend to him. Magic was a factor here as well. Who was she to say that the owl wasn't capable of more complex thought processes?

"Could be," she finally admitted, deciding to focus on one thing at a time. "In the meantime I...well..." she faltered, coming back around to the reason she'd been sitting at Harry's bedside instead of catching

some sleep in the first place. She wasn't sure she could adequately describe the "calm before the storm" sensation she was feeling, but it reminded her of the eerie silence that fell right before dark clouds boiled in, and the sky turned greenish black.

"I want to stay a little longer--just to be sure," she finally finished. "Why don't you go get some sleep? God knows one of us is going to have to be alert tomorrow."

He squeezed her hand. "We'll manage. Want me to go put on the kettle?"

Janet nodded. A cup of tea sounded heavenly. "Thanks, sweetie," she said, smiling as he snapped her a jaunty salute and vanished into the hall. Once he was gone she regarded Hedwig again. "I'd feel better if someone looked at him, and I reserve the right to get medical assistance if he gets worse," she asserted pugnaciously, feeling ridiculous as she did so, then blinking in surprise. Did the owl just nod? She watched as Hedwig studied her closely, something like sympathy in her yellow eyes, before spreading her wings and fluttering through the doorway. Before Janet had a chance to wonder where she'd gone--or take advantage of her absence--she was back, with something clenched tightly in one talon.

"What do you have there?" Janet asked, trying not to flinch too noticeably when the owl landed on her lap. Hedwig was surprisingly gentle, though, gripping Janet's leg with minimal force, and balancing on one foot with practiced ease. When Janet finally registered what the bird was offering her, she almost laughed aloud. It was the small pad of paper and pen she kept near the downstairs phone.

Well, Tom did say wizards send messages by owl... Janet mused, taking the paper and pen from Hedwig with an automatic "thank you." The only problem was, she had absolutely no idea who to contact. Harry and Tom were the only wizards she knew. Surely she wasn't suggesting writing a letter to Tom...not after the way she'd acted. Besides it seemed silly when he was so close by.

Hedwig pecked at the paper, then flapped a wing at Harry.

"What? What do you want me to do?" she asked blankly, before the pieces clicked. I reserve the right to get medical assistance, she'd said. "Do you know someone I could contact to look him over? Someone safe?" she asked, relief overriding her annoyance when Hedwig looked at her like she was the class dunce. "Hey, cut me some slack, here," she complained, clicking the top of the pen to expose the writing point, "I've never done this before."

Sirius Black knelt across from Dumbledore, more frightened than he'd ever been in his life. Between them, Fawkes, the headmaster's phoenix, sang soft soothing notes as he tried to anchor Harry's ghostlike form.

Stifling a sigh, Sirius raked a hand through his hair. It was a good thing Arabella had met Remus and him at the door and held them back long enough to explain what they were about to see. First sight of Harry in his current state was bad enough with advance warning. Even the usually unflappable Remus Lupin had been unable to completely hide his horror and concern.

Sirius hadn't even tried. Seeing Harry there looking about as substantial as dandelion fluff had been off-putting to say the least.

Naturally, he'd wanted to know what the bloody hell was going on, but there hadn't been a lot of time for explanations. Harry had been finishing up a report on what Voldemort was up to when they'd arrived. The short of it was, Voldemort had selected alternate targets, and two homes were now at risk.

As soon as Dumbledore had an idea of what Voldemort's plan was, he'd immediately dispatched Moony and Mad-Eye to the Granger residence as a precautionary measure--a decision that left Sirius feeling jealous and guilty by turns. Mrs. Figg was put to work relaying all new information to the team at the Burrow via Order parchment. Respecting present company, Dumbledore had claimed Sirius was being kept behind for his own protection, but the animagus knew that wasn't the only reason. Harry very obviously needed someone right now.

So now they all found themselves in Sirius' least favorite place to be: sitting helplessly on the sidelines and waiting for any bit of news from

those who were in the thick of things. Arabella grew fidgety and went to the kitchen to make tea, leaving the three wizards keeping their vigil by the fireplace.

Grimacing, Sirius glanced at his godson. He had no idea what to say or do. Already distraught about the Burrow, Harry hadn't taken the possible threat against Hermione very well at all. Before today, he hadn't known that ghosts could go paler, but somehow Harry had managed it.

Still, even as diminished as he was, Harry hadn't lost any of his fight. Rather like James in that regard, Sirius mused, a fond smile touching his lips. Once he'd gotten over the worst of his shock, Harry had turned to Fawkes and begged the bird to take him to Hermione's house so he could spread the alarm. Sirius wasn't exactly sure what the phoenix had said in reply, but judging from the bird's tone and the injured look on his godson's face, he reckoned the short version was "no" or perhaps more closely, "are you out of your bloody mind?"

Dumbledore had stepped in and put an end to that nonsense by sending the others to the Granger house instead.

Wait... Said? Sirius raised his eyebrows and glanced speculatively from the scarlet and gold phoenix to the older wizard across from him. Unsurprisingly, he found Dumbledore studying Harry as well, a thoughtful expression in his legendary blue eyes. He opened his mouth to ask what was going on, but Dumbledore caught his eye and ordered him to silence with a slightly raised hand and an almost imperceptible slight shake of his head. Later. Not now.

Finally sighing out loud, Sirius tried to put a hand on Harry's shoulder, catching himself with a startled yelp as his hand passed completely through the boy's insubstantial body. "Sorry," he said sheepishly, gladdened to see a flash of amusement, no matter how brief, appear in Harry's eyes. Harry had seemed okay in the beginning--a bit overexcited and see-through, maybe, but essentially all right. Now...

Now he wasn't looking so good.

Sirius regarded his godson again, hating that he was having such a hard time of it, and wishing there was something he could do to help. Initially, Harry had knelt in front of Arabella's fireplace, back straight, eyes alert, and stared into it with an intensity that was almost frightening. As time passed, the amount of effort he was expending became more and more obvious. Harry's attention was still riveted to the fireplace, almost as if he was trying force a firecall by the strength of his will alone, but his posture told a different tale. Now he was seated on the floor with his legs in a "W" position, back hunched, head drooping, and breath coming in little pants. Sirius reckoned he couldn't last much longer before toppling over completely, and wondered how on Earth he was going to catch him when he did.

Instinctively he tried to grasp Harry's hand, clenching his fist in frustration when his godson's intangible state made that quite impossible. In fact, the only creature present who was able to touch Harry was Fawkes. The phoenix had Harry by the wrist, and, according to Dumbledore, was literally holding him in place. He might even be lending the boy some of his own strength.

Fawkes also seemed well aware of Harry's distress, and was trying to soothe it in his own birdlike way, for which Sirius was grateful. Every now and then he would sing a fortifying note, gently groom Harry's untidy hair, or else nuzzle him with his beak.

Finally unable to stand the near silence anymore, Sirius asked his godson the question he was dying to know the answer to. "Harry? Is Wormtail among the Death Eaters at the Burrow?"

Harry slowly turned toward him and shook his head, a regretful look on his face. "He stayed behind...with Voldemort...and Professor Snape."

Dumbledore frowned at this. "You didn't mention Professor Snape, although I did wonder why he hadn't contacted us."

"He couldn't." Harry closed his eyes and seemed to marshal his resources. "Voldemort took his wand...and put him in a full body bind," he explained, the strain he was under showing clearly in his face and voice.

Dumbledore hesitated, as though gauging how far to push. When he finally spoke, it was clear he was preparing himself for bad news. "Are you saying Voldemort suspects Severus?"

Harry seemed to consider this, frowning a bit as he mulled it over. "Some of his Death Eaters do," he finally admitted, opening his eyes again.

If the situation hadn't been so potentially dire, Sirius would have laughed at Dumbledore's flabbergasted expression. "Why didn't you mention this before?" the headmaster demanded.

Harry shrugged as he turned to face the older wizard. "He's...safe enough, I think. Voldemort doesn't really want to kill him."

That makes him the only one, Sirius grumbled to himself.

"Besides...no one knew about the change of plan...and Snape's been silenced all this time," Harry pointed out with some effort. "Voldemort can't exactly blame the Order's arrival on him now...can he?"

"Professor Snape, Harry," Dumbledore corrected automatically, but Sirius didn't think he looked too fussed. It was hard for anyone to buy that stern "Headmaster" face when his eyes were twinkling like that.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied dutifully, turning to listen when Fawkes chirped at him in an oddly scolding way. "Fawkes says I need to shut up now if I want to stay," he translated, giving his companions an apologetic little half smile.

"You understand him?" Dumbledore asked, looking intrigued, then surprised when the phoenix turned on him, flapping his wings and screeching angrily.

"Really, Fawkes, it isn't as bad as all that," Harry tried to soothe the bird, earning a baleful glare and another scolding for his trouble.

"Arabella? Albus?" a voice called as the fireplace flared.

Shacklebolt! Sirius grinned eagerly. Finally!

"It's over," Kingsley reported, cutting immediately to the chase after returning Dumbledore's greeting. "The Burrow sustained some structural damage, but it should be fixable. More importantly, we managed to get the family out before anyone was hurt."

"Where is Minerva?" Dumbledore asked, obviously wondering why she hadn't been the one to make the call.

"Unconscious. The house was filled with some sort of anesthetic. It appears the Death Eaters' plan was to sedate everyone, including their Muggle accomplices, and burn the place down. Luckily, Minerva and Arthur used their Order portkeys and managed to get Ginny, Fred, and George out before they went under. Madam Pomfrey diagnosed the cause and got word back to us before anyone else fell victim to it."

"Was anyone else hurt?" Arabella called from the kitchen doorway. Shacklebolt shook his head.

"Not physically, though it looks like Voldemort tampered with the Muggles. We have some people trying to sort them out but it doesn't look promising. McGonagall, the Weasleys, and the Granger girl should sleep until morning. Professor Sprout is looking after them now."

Harry's head shot up at the mention of Hermione's name. Sirius gave him a reassuring look and addressed the Auror in the fireplace. "Kingsley, what's wrong with Hermione?"

"Her family was fetched as a precautionary measure so it didn't occur to her that the Weasleys had actually been attacked. She had a nasty shock when Remus portkeyed her and her family to the Hospital wing and she saw all the Weasleys unconscious. Professor Sprout gave her a mild Calming Draught. She probably slipped a few drops into the tea she served the parents as well. At any rate, they're all asleep now."

"Professor Sprout? Wait, where is Poppy?" Dumbledore asked with a frown.

"She got an urgent owl, that's all I know."

"I see. And the Death Eaters?"

Kingsley shrugged. "It wasn't much of a fight. If someone hadn't touched off the firebomb fluid Weasley would have escaped almost completely unscathed. We managed to catch a couple, but most of them were portkeyed out when we arrived. From the looks of them, they were mostly new recruits with maybe one or two senior members keeping an eye on them. They didn't appear to be expecting any resistance."

"Hmm, yes, well if we hadn't had a very timely warning, they probably wouldn't have gotten any," Dumbledore said, turning to smile proudly at Harry, then interrupting himself with a startled gasp.

Frowning, Sirius turned and immediately saw what the matter was.

Fawkes was collapsed on the floor already deeply asleep, and Harry was gone.

It is time, Fledgling. Farewell...

That was it. All the warning he'd been given. Before Harry even had time to process the statement, much less respond to it, the firebird opened his golden talons.

Once that occurred it had all been over. With nothing to anchor him and no chance to brace, Harry had found himself at the mercy of his overextended Astral link. When Fawkes let go it was akin to firing a catapult, or perhaps a crossbow. He'd been flung backwards with terrific force, flashing across the empty miles and slamming back into his body before he could even draw breath to shout.

"Harry?"

"What is it? Is he coming around?"

"I'm not sure...he jerked a little but doesn't seem to be seizing again. Harry?" the voice asked, sounding cautiously hopeful.

Shivering violently, Harry tried to respond, but couldn't manage more than a pathetic-sounding whimper. Now that the shock of impact was fading, he was becoming more and more aware of his own body. Or, more specifically, the level of discomfort he was experiencing. He ached all over and his head was splitting fit to burst. Worse yet, his comfortable bed which had been soft and warm before, was suddenly hard and cold. Beyond cold. Bloody freezing was more like it.

"Good! Keep talking to him. He seems to be responding to your voice."

"Okay... Harry? Sweetie? Can you hear me?"

Swallowing painfully, Harry managed a tiny nod, squeezing the hand that held his own as he fought to get his bearings. The aches and pains that seemed to ooze up from his very bone marrow were far more acute than they'd been before. It actually felt much closer to the Beaten-From-Head-To-Toe-Hurts-To-Even-Think feeling that followed multiple castings of--

"Crucio!"

Wha--? Harry sucked in an agonized gasp, feeling his back arch and his muscles clench as Voldemort's rage and frustration sizzled across their link. The connection was still open, fueled entirely by his enemy's wrath. He caught a quick impression of Voldemort stalking among his bedraggled, terrified followers, firing off blast after blast of punishing magic. Fools! Incompetents! Crucio! Dissendium! Crucio! Avada Kedavra!

"It's happening again!" the voice beside him snapped, seeming to address someone else, before returning its attention to him and speaking urgent encouragement in his ear again. "Hold on, sweetie, I'm right here. You're going to be all right. Just hang on..."

Making a sound like an animal in pain, Harry did just that, gripping the hand in his like a lifeline. A second later what felt like a numbing spell tingled mercifully across his sensitized skin.

"Steady, Mr. Potter, there's a good lad..."

Voldemort had an impressive capacity for anger, but even he couldn't remain angry forever. Gradually his fury diminished, leaving icy disappointment in its wake. Harry watched his enemy lower his wand and order his followers from his presence in tones of deepest disgust before the link finally failed, leaving him laying sore, freezing, and utterly spent in his unusually hard bed.

"Harry?" The voice sounded tearful now, and not so far away. "Come on, sweetie...you can do it..."

Harry swallowed again, still shuddering convulsively. This would never do. Tugging his hands free, he groped blindly about before wrapping both arms around himself in an effort to conserve warmth. "C-cold," he managed, unable to shake the feeling that something was not quite right here. Where on Earth were his blankets? "Hurts."

"I'm sure. Poor thing. You've had a hard night." Harry made an effort to open his eyes, and found himself looking into Janet's red-rimmed ones. She gave him a tearful smile before slipping an arm behind his shoulders and pulling him close. "Welcome back, sweetheart. Thank God...oh thank God..." she murmured, rocking him gently.

"May I take a look at him, dear?"

"Oh, of course! I'm sorry, doctor," Janet said, sounding rather abashed. She gave Harry a kiss on the temple and one last squeeze, then set him back against his rock-hard pillows with a little splash.

Wait.

Doctor?

Splash?

Oh, no. Oh, nonono.

"Why Mr. Potter, if I didn't know better, I'd swear you weren't happy to see me," Madam Pomfrey said, heating the bathwater with a wave of her wand. Hedwig sat on her shoulder with his Order portkey dangling from her beak.

Oh, God... Harry thought with a mortified moan, hiding his face in his hands, and sliding under the water until only his knobbly knees were sticking out.

Chapter 33: A Little Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing

July 26, 1995

"There's been some trouble regarding Harry."

Percy Weasley made an irritated sound and punched his pillows, wondering if it was finally time to get up. His sleep had been plagued with half remembered dreams and the nagging of his guilty conscience. He patted around for his horn-rimmed glasses, then held them in front of his face so he could glance at the clock.

Too Early To Be Awake. Lovely.

Heaving a great sigh, Percy re-folded his glasses and tried to settle in again. His conscience didn't get the hint though, and continued to prod at him, speaking in his father's voice.

"Professor Dumbledore has reason to believe Harry's Archive folder is malfunctioning."

"The evidence suggests his guardians have been negligent."

"His folder was supposed to alarm if anything unusual happened, and it hasn't."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Percy recalled the day before when he'd been sent to fetch Harry Potter's folder from the Census Library and Archive. In retrospect, he'd been the junior person on the premises and the most logical choice for the task, but at the time he'd been a little miffed over the whole affair. The minister didn't usually treat him like a common errand boy.

Still, he'd been willing to follow the minister's lead and keep up appearances. Alienating Dumbledore served no purpose, after all. He was still the Hogwarts Headmaster, and a great favorite in the Wizarding Community. It was a pity the old chap seemed to be slipping, but there was no cure for growing old. It happened to everyone eventually.

Keeping that sentiment firmly in mind, Percy had decided rather magnanimously that there was no real harm in humoring his former headmaster. He'd fetch the folder. The minister might even agree to open it, just to put Dumbledore's fears to rest. By the time he'd returned, folder in hand, he'd been so wrapped up in his own hubris he hadn't known how to react when Professor Flitwick discovered a Silencing Charm on the thing.

A Silencing Charm!

"His folder was supposed to alarm if anything unusual happened, and it hasn't..."

And the noise the folder had made when the charm was removed! Percy ran a weary hand through his sleep-tousled hair. Thank heavens Professor Flitwick had erected a barrier before removing the spell. If he hadn't, the sonic blast that issued forth might have deafened the lot of them. As it was, the folder's alarm was enough to make everyone's ears ring in spite of Flitwick's Muffling Charm.

Heaving a great sigh, Percy finally gave up and reached for his glasses again. Ignoring the "Go Back To Sleep, Stupid!" admonition on his clock's face, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and searched for his slippers and dressing gown.

Dumbledore was wrong about one thing, though, he mused, padding toward the kitchen of his new flat. Even if he'd given in to his father's original request it would have been for naught. Clearly, more than one member of the Wizengamot was needed to open the folder. When Minister Fudge and Professor Dumbledore had attempted it, they had failed. Percy had eventually returned the folder to its place in the library, Cornelius Fudge's demands for an investigation still ringing in his ears.

"Maybe his folder hasn't alerted because nothing's wrong."

"That's the assumption people have been working under for the past several years. Actually I think the folder has been silent so long everyone had practically forgotten it."

That was it. The heart of the matter. After Minister Fudge had told him about the exquisite magical protection surrounding Harry Potter, Percy had almost convinced himself that he must have been mistaken about the degree of danger Harry had been in during his school years. Clearly Harry couldn't have been in any real danger, and of course the idea that his Muggle relatives mistreated him was pure rubbish.

Wasn't it?

"What if Dumbledore's right, Perce? What if the folder is malfunctioning and Harry's relatives are not taking proper care of him? You may not care, but I will not tolerate Harry or any child being mistreated."

Shut up.

Percy winced, trying to ignore the hot guilty feeling the memory engendered. Potter wasn't mistreated. He wasn't! he insisted, pressing his lips together and resolutely putting the kettle on the stove.

Madam Pomfrey paused on a rise between Hogwarts and the village of Hogsmeade. The grounds were always particularly lovely this time of year, and the scene below made a very pretty picture. Hogwarts castle rose majestically before her, framed by the green, flower-dotted landscape and the sparkling blue water of Hogwarts Lake, but she was too troubled to fully appreciate it.

Adjusting her grip on her medical bag, she sighed and continued down the path, heading for the castle gates. Normally she found the walk between the village and the castle soothing. Indeed, that had been the primary reason she'd Apparated to the outskirts of Hogsmeade instead of using a shorter, more direct approach to return to the hospital wing. She'd hoped a brisk walk would help her get her thoughts in order, but today even the morning sun dancing playfully on the lake's surface wasn't enough to successfully distract her.

As she walked, Poppy found herself recalling the speech Albus made at the end of term--about what is right and what is easy. She knew what the headmaster was getting at of course, she'd lived through You Know Who's first rise to power, but that didn't mean she was looking forward to what was coming once she got back to the castle. Albus and Pomona were probably quite cross with her for disappearing the way she had. The fact that she'd gotten caught up in events beyond her control might be her only saving grace.

It was almost funny, since the evening had actually been rather ordinary up to that point. She and Pomona Sprout had been summoned to watch the hospital wing...had it only been last evening? Poppy shook her head as she continued. With all the excitement, it seemed like more time had passed. At any rate, the two of them had made quick work of getting the hospital wing in order, caught up on each others' news, then settled in to wait. One watched the ward while the other napped--standard operating procedure.

Things had stayed quiet until well after midnight, when the alarm signaling an Order portkey being activated sounded twice, and their first group of casualties arrived. Of the lot, Minerva McGonagall had been the only one still clinging to consciousness. Her whispered warning about the invisible trap waiting in the Burrow soon had Poppy scurrying to contact the other Order defenders before anyone else blundered into it. That accomplished, she had just been going to help Professor Sprout when the alarm went off again. Changing direction, she'd hurried over to the spot where new patients portkeyed in, but this time a snowy owl appeared!

Some post owls were accustomed to Portkey or Floo travel, but this one clearly was not. Poppy had quickly picked up the corners of her apron and rushed forward to catch the disoriented creature. Odd. The Order portkey system was set up so even an ill or injured member could make use of it. Why had the owner sent an owl with a note?

And why did the owl seem so familiar? There weren't many snowys around...

Poppy had puzzled that over as the owl righted itself and settled on her shoulder. Still trying to place the bird, she'd taken the letter from its beak, fingers flying to her mouth when she thought of a possible answer. Potter! Potter has a snowy owl! The bird's brilliant white plumage made it stick out in a crowd, and she'd admired it many times when post was delivered in the Great Hall.

That had put things in a whole new light.

Poppy smiled a little when she recalled her own reaction to that little brainstorm. She'd been nearly beside herself with concern, thinking that Potter must be very bad off indeed if he was actually asking for help! It had taken her a second or two to catch on to the obvious--namely Potter hadn't written the note himself.

Dear Sir or Madam:

I apologize in advance if this letter seems unusual, but I find myself in a rather unusual situation...

Unusual. Poppy almost laughed aloud at the blatant understatement. "Unusual" didn't even begin to cover it.

Still, she hadn't been overly concerned, at least not at first. Aside from the thin, Muggle paper it had been written on, the letter itself had been rather unremarkable in spite of its dramatic arrival. It was nothing more than a request for a house call, really. From the symptoms described, it sounded like Potter had a combination of gastroenteritis and pharyngitis. Nasty, but certainly fixable. The writer--Janet Wright--had also mentioned prolonged unresponsiveness, but Poppy had taken that in stride. She'd tended Potter many times in the last four years and was well aware of the boy's tendency to sleep long and deeply when recovering from an injury. It was quite likely he reacted the same way to illness. If so, she couldn't blame the woman for being concerned. She'd found Potter's healing process a bit discomfiting herself the first time she'd observed it.

Discomfiting! Poppy shook her head again, tutting at her own arrogance. The address Janet provided was in the general vicinity of

the Leaky Cauldron, so after warning Pomona she'd be out for a bit, she'd opted to Floo there and Apparate to Potter's location. Her plan had been simple: Check on Potter, stabilize him if necessary, and bring him back to the hospital wing. The whole errand should have taken thirty minutes. An hour at most.

Should have. "Should" being the key word there.

Naturally, it didn't.

Oh, no, the situation she found when she arrived at the Wright residence was a far cry from the simple little exam and treatment she'd been expecting.

Pausing again at the castle entrance, Poppy hesitated with her hand on the door then squared her shoulders and marched through. When one had a nasty dose of medicine coming, it was always best to take it quickly.

She was about halfway to the infirmary when a voice caught her attention. "Poppy! Where on Earth have you been, dear?"

Turning, Madam Pomfrey saw Professor Flitwick hurrying toward her with at least a dozen breakfast trays trailing in his wake. Instantly alert, she asked, "Did something else happen?" There was more food than necessary for Arthur Weasley's family. Anticipating a disaster, Poppy unconsciously quickened her step, making the little Charms professor trot to keep up with her.

"How bad is it?" she asked, stopping dead in her tracks for a moment. "Oh, Pomona!" she groaned, hurrying even more.

"Now, now calm down, dear," Flitwick puffed, trying to avoid spilling the trays as they clanked and rattled behind him. "It's not as bad as all that. There were a few minor injuries, but I stayed around to help. Most everyone was treated and released. The patients still in the hospital wing are simply sleeping off one soporific agent or another. Pomona thinks they'll be waking soon."

Relieved beyond speech, Poppy slowed her pace, then stopped, leaning gratefully against the wall and allowing him to fill her in on the night's activities. Now that the adrenaline surge she'd just had was fading, her own fatigue was beginning to creep in. A small dose of Pepper-Up might be in order once they reached the hospital wing. She simply couldn't shake off these all night emergencies the way she used to.

Flitwick noticed, of course, and asked after her as they continued on their way. "Are you quite all right dear? Where ever have you been?"

Poppy sighed. "I'm fine, Filius, just tired. I've been in London...tending Mr. Potter," she admitted, wincing when his mouth fell open and the breakfast trays wavered dangerously before he got them under control again.

They walked in silence for a few paces, the trays trailing behind them like a line of baby ducks, before the little Charms professor spoke again.

"Is the boy all right?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "Yes. He's resting comfortably."

"But he's still in London?"

"Yes."

Flitwick's face twisted into a mask of confusion. "May I ask why?"

Poppy sighed. "I'd rather wait to answer that until all concerned parties are assembled."

Filius chuckled. "I think you'll find lots of 'concerned parties' behind that door," he said dryly, pointing to the wooden slab that separated the hospital wing from the rest of the castle.

Poppy sighed as she straightened her hat and smoothed her apron. As soon as she stepped through that door she was going to be the

absolute center of attention. "Very well. I suppose we'd better get on with it," she said, reaching for the latch.

"Wait," Flitwick said, catching her wrist. "Let me go first. The house elves sent some lovely sticky buns. You might have an easier time of it if their teeth are stuck together."

This is the height of idiocy! Percy grumbled to himself as he headed to one of the Ministry's more out of the way Floo connections. Honestly! It isn't as though I don't have anything else to do!

Stopping in the hall, he considered abandoning the errand, then shook his head and pressed on. The Silencing Charm they'd found yesterday had shaken his confidence, and just now when he'd pulled the access instructions for the Boy Who Lived, it was obvious no one had even touched them since early 1982.

Besides, all he really had to do was check in with the custodian. Harry didn't even have to know he'd been there. Feeling much better, Percy drew the instructions out of his robe pocket as he knelt in front of the little-used grate. "Arabella Figg," he called, throwing a pinch of Floo Powder in the fireplace.

Within seconds he was staring into a rather Muggle looking lounge. Percy frowned a bit, wondering if he had the right grate, then recalled the caretaker had to masquerade as a Muggle. It had all been there in the instructions, along with explicit instructions to Floo, not apparate.

The procedure had also cautioned against drawing attention to oneself, and waiting until Mrs. Figg acknowledged the call before proceeding.

So where on Earth was she?

Percy shifted a bit as his knees began to protest his kneeling on the hard floor. "Mrs. Figg? Mrs. Figg, are you there?" he called, remembering belatedly that it was rather early still, and it was possible she wasn't up and about yet.

"Who's there?" a sleepy voice finally asked from the couch. Percy frowned, unsure whether to be concerned or annoyed when he caught sight of the exhausted-looking witch. The rumpled state of her hair and Muggle clothing seemed to suggest she'd slept on the sofa all night.

"My name is Percy Weasley--I'm with the Ministry of Magic," Percy said, watching as she got up and walked over.

"Percy? Good Lord! I haven't seen you since before you started Hogwarts! I don't expect you remember me, though," Mrs. Figg said, showing a great deal more animation. "Come in, dear, please! It'll just take a second to heat up the kettle."

"Don't go to any trouble on my account," Percy said, lurching forward out of the hearth as his body joined his head in the witch's lounge.

"No trouble," Mrs. Figg assured him from the kitchen. "I could do with a cuppa myself after last night. How is your family this morning, dear? All fine I hope?"

Percy had no idea, but assumed he'd have been notified if any calamity occurred. "They're fine so far as I know," he hedged. "Thank you for asking."

"Good," Mrs. Figg said, relief obvious on her face as she came bustling back with two steaming mugs and a plate of pastries on a tray. "I've been so worried, especially with all that You Know Who unpleasantness."

Oh, smashing, Percy groaned, taking a sip of tea and making a noncommittal noise around it. Dad's been spreading that You Know Who rubbish again. He waited for her to demand answers, the Ministry's pat answer on the tip of his tongue, but she surprised him by delicately letting the matter drop.

"That's better," she remarked, after they'd sipped their tea in silence for a few minutes. "Now, what can I do for you, dear?"

"I'm here on Ministry business, Mrs. Figg," Percy began, after swallowing a bite of pastry.

"Ah, you'll be wanting to see Vernon's house, I suppose," Mrs. Figg said with a sigh before he could elaborate.

"Vernon?"

"Vernon Dursley, Harry's uncle."

In spite of everything, Percy didn't want this impromptu visit noised about. Not yet, at any rate. "I don't want to disturb anyone," he backpedaled. "I just wanted to check up on the, erm, current state of affairs."

Mrs. Figg shrugged, taking out her wand and weaving a complex series of charms around Percy. "It's early enough, I doubt anyone will notice you. If they do, just tell them you're interested in the house."

"The Muggles won't mind?" Percy asked, finding that rather hard to believe, especially given his father's stories about Harry's aunt and uncle.

"Why should they mind? That's what it's there for, after all. Actually, I think I'll go with you," she decided, ushering him out the door. "I need to remove some Muggle Aversion Charms, and now's as good a time as any."

Muggle Aversion charms? Percy frowned in confusion. That certainly didn't tally. "I thought Harry's Muggle relatives didn't like magic," he commented as they made their way up the street.

Mrs Figg's expression grew unexpectedly grim. "They don't," she said, further bewildering Percy when she lowered her eyes as though ashamed. "That poor child. That poor sweet child," she said with a sigh. When she looked up he was astonished to actually see tears in her eyes. What on Earth was going on? She clearly thought he knew what she was talking about. How could he ask without sounding like a fool? What had upset her so? And on that subject, why the uncommonly keen interest in his family's welfare?

They walked a few more paces in silence, moving like ghosts through the damp, gray morning. Mrs. Figg shook herself out of her reverie after a few moments, but her choice of topic only added more questions to Percy's already racing brain.

"The wards surrounding the property are fairly standard. An extra set was added to track Harry if he ventured too far from the house--he was just a toddler you know--and I think others were installed to detect magical activity in the house. Anti-Apparation wards extend about twenty-five meters from the house in all directions. There's also a series of wards across most of the neighborhood that allows me to know if a magical person is about," Mrs. Figg explained as they made their way along. Percy nodded politely, but didn't really see why she was telling him all this, unless it was merely a point of interest. He might not agree with all the decisions Harry had made over the years, but that didn't mean he wanted the younger boy here without protection. The way she was carrying on, one would think preparations were being made to dismantle the wards!

"Here we are," Mrs. Figg announced, breaking his train of thought. "Number four," she said, pointing.

Percy squinted through his glasses. "There must be some mistake. That house is for sale...and completely vacant!" he exclaimed after walking up to the house and peering in a window.

"There's been some trouble regarding Harry..."

"There's always trouble regarding Harry. What's he done this time?"

"He hasn't done anything. Professor Dumbledore has reason to believe Harry's Archive folder is malfunctioning."

Mrs. Figg looked up from removing her Muggle Aversion Charms. "Did Arthur forget to tell you? The family's gone. Moved out of the country."

"So what does this have to do with me?"

"Harry's folder is sealed. We need approval from the Wizengamot and the Minister's Office to access it."

"No! Absolutely not! The headmaster can make an appointment and go through proper channels just like everyone else!"

"Well, normally he would, Perce, but this is a bit of an emergency."

"No, Dad. An emergency would be you and I both getting sacked for doing something so stupidly irresponsible..."

"...no longer necessary, I reckoned the Minister would send a team of Aurors out to remove the wards, were you not here to gather specifications?"

"Oh, no. I mean yes! Where is my mind?" Percy replied, buying a little time to regroup by reaching inside his robe for the quill and parchment he always carried and scribbling down what she'd already said. When he was caught up, she carried on, describing the ward structure and telling him the best times to send people in without their being noticed. Percy took it all down but was no longer really listening. As soon as he could manage it, he was back at the Ministry, hurrying toward the Census Library as fast as his long legs could carry him. "Petrificus Totalus!"

Bloody hell! Ron thought, eyeing the statue-like form of Sirius Black while trying to move his own frozen limbs. Madam Pomfrey had a reputation for being someone a bloke shouldn't cross, but before now he'd always taken the warnings in stride.

As the furious matron stalked across his line of vision he began to see her in a whole new light. Definitely not someone to trifle with! Who'd have thought her capable of immobilizing six wizards with a single wave of her wand?

A tentative hand on his shoulder drew his attention, then Hermione stepped out where he could see her. Ron smiled inwardly, warmed by the concerned little frown on her face. It didn't last long, though. Once

she decided he was probably all right, she crossed her arms, gave him her most withering look, and mouthed, I told you so!

Yeah, yeah, he returned, with a mental eye-roll, pausing nervously as Madam Pomfrey glared at him, before moving on to Sirius, Professor Lupin, Fred, George, and his father. He caught sight of her again as she stepped out of the center of them and rounded on Professors Flitwick, McGonagall, and Dumbledore.

"Do you have anything to say?" she demanded, her wand still clenched in her fist.

In hindsight, Ron reckoned they probably shouldn't have rushed her like that, but still! This was Harry, for Heaven's sake! Judging from what she'd said before they'd descended on her, Harry was very ill and in the care of Muggles yet! How could she just leave him there?

Professor Dumbledore won't stand for this! Ron mused confidently, waiting for his headmaster to disarm Madam Pomfrey and put in her place. He'll put a stop to this nonsense and order her to tell him everything!

Naturally, Dumbledore did the unexpected.

Instead of becoming angry, or at the very least releasing Ron and the others from the petrifying spell, the headmaster lifted his hands in a pacifying manner, and answered the question posed to him.

"I have nothing to say at the present time, Poppy, but I do have questions. Perhaps if you begin at the beginning, we can better understand your decision to leave Mr. Potter behind."

"That's exactly what I was doing before this gang of hoodlums interrupted," the Mediwitch snapped, indicating Ron and the others with a jab of her wand.

Dumbledore hummed in agreement, an amused twinkle in his eye. "I daresay they won't do it again, dear lady," he pointed out, enjoying the situation entirely too much for Ron's taste. If Dumbledore wasn't going to reprimand Madam Pomfrey that was his business of course,

but couldn't he at least perform the counterspell? It was dead awkward being stuck this way, and his nose was beginning to itch.

Clearly still miffed about the whole affair, Madam Pomfrey didn't reply immediately. Instead she glared at the group of petrified wizards, giving Sirius a particularly nasty look before relenting and putting her wand back in her pocket.

Without bothering to remove her spell, of course.

Ron sighed inwardly. Naturally. That would be too bloody convenient.

Unable to do much else, he listened as Madam Pomfrey described how Harry's owl Hedwig insisted on coming along, even though that meant a ride through the Floo Network. Once they arrived at the Leaky Cauldron, they'd made their way to the address specified in the letter.

"It was the home of a Muggle family Mr. Potter befriended this summer," Madam Pomfrey explained, "or perhaps mixed family would be more accurate. The father is a Muggle; the mother and their two daughters are untrained witches."

Hermione took immediate notice of that, looking up, then frowning in a way that meant she was trying to recall something. "Daughters..." she murmured, pursing her lips in concentration. Ron had just enough time to wonder what she was on about before she gasped and thrust her hand into the air. "Madam Pomfrey?"

For a second Ron thought Madam Pomfrey might remind his friend that classes weren't currently in session.

For a second.

In the end she chose the path of least resistance. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

Hermione was now wearing her "I'm Thinking As Hard As I Can" face. "If you please, Madam Pomfrey, is Harry with an American family?"

"What?"

Oh...of course! Ron thought, snickering inwardly when Madam Pomfrey crossed his line of vision again. The gobsmacked look on her face was almost worth being petrified. Things got even better when Professor McGonagall blinked as though recalling something and spoke up.

"An American family, Poppy? Would their name be 'Wright' by any chance?"

"Why yes! But how on Earth did you know?" the Mediwitch demanded, glancing between Hermione and Professor McGonagall.

"Abigail Penstone, head registrar at the Salem Witches' Institute, contacted me about a week ago. It seems the family of one Katrina Wright relocated to England earlier this summer," Professor McGonagall replied. "She requested permission to offer Hogwarts as an option when she sent the girl her acceptance letter."

The Head of Gryffindor paused, then peered suspiciously at Hermione through her square framed glasses. "And you, Miss Granger? What exactly is your part in this?"

"I was thinking of the family Ron, Mr. Weasley and I saw at the Leaky Cauldron, Professor. They appeared to have three children...two little girls, and an older boy who reminded us all of Harry. Now that I think of it, the older girl might have been the right size for a First Year," she said, growing excited. "Maybe it was Harry, then!"

"Perhaps," Professor Dumbledore cautioned, "but recall, Arthur said Amos Diggory spotted a boy who resembles Mr. Potter at Flourish & Blotts. According to the staff, the boy has dark eyes and his name is Jim Patterson."

That brought Hermione up short. "I forgot that part," she admitted with a sigh, "but he looks so much like Harry! Professor, I still think this Jim Patterson person is worth speaking to!"

"As do we, Miss Granger," Professor Dumbledore assured her. "In fact..." the headmaster pulled absently on his beard and turned to his deputy. "Minerva, were you able to catch up to our mysterious Mr. Patterson?"

McGonagall shook her head. "I've only seen him through the Leaky Cauldron windows. I haven't been able to approach him out of doors."

"Jim Patterson...interesting," Madam Pomfrey mused. "I didn't really consider the significance last night, but I think Miss Granger may have the right of it. Now understand, the boy I tended last night was Harry Potter--green eyes and all--but now that you mention it, the family did act like they were accustomed to calling him by another name. The parents were making an effort to call him 'Harry', but they were clearly more accustomed to addressing him as 'Sparky', 'Jim', or 'Jimmy'."

Sparky? Ron laughed inwardly wondering how Harry had gotten stuck with that one. Maybe it had something to do with that lightning-shaped scar of his.

"Well that certainly strengthens the theory that Harry Potter and Jim Patterson are the same person," Professor McGonagall admitted, "The eyecolor could be a Glamour I suppose...but didn't Arthur say a member of the Flourish & Blotts staff cast Finite Incantatem on him?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "All that proves is he didn't use a spell. There are many methods for changing one's appearance."

"Appearance yes, but eyecolor? "

Dumbledore held up a hand. "I know it seems odd, Minerva, but we could be overlooking something. For now let's agree that Jim Patterson could be Harry Potter in disguise and get back to the business at hand." He waited for her nod then turned back to the hospital matron. "Poppy?"

Madam Pomfrey paused a moment, gathering her thoughts. "The father answered the door when I arrived," she continued. "He seemed tense--worried--and if I'm not mistaken, he actually looked to Potter's

owl before allowing me in. I probably should have taken a little time to reassure him, but I was anxious to be on my way. Since there were already casualties at Hogwarts, I'd planned to collect Mr. Potter and take him back to the hospital wing. Unfortunately circumstances made that quite impossible."

"What circumstances were those, Poppy?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Well, the mother for one thing," Madam Pomfrey admitted with a rueful shake of her head. "She went so far as to ask the owl if I was the one she'd gone after, and flatly refused when I offered to take Mr. Potter away."

That surprised Ron, particularly since Harry's Muggle relatives practically shoved him out the door at every given opportunity. Hermione seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

"What? But why?" she asked, impatient anger beginning to creep into her voice. "Why would she send for help only to refuse it?"

"She didn't refuse my help, Miss Granger. She refused to let me take Mr. Potter away without his knowledge and consent. There is a difference."

"But--"

"Understand, Miss Granger, the Wrights were in a rather difficult situation. They were quite nice, and rather apologetic about the whole thing, but my boundaries were clear. I was there on Mr. Potter's owl's recommendation so they trusted me to a point, but only so far. The only two wizards they were acquainted with were Mr. Potter, and Tom from the Leaky Cauldron. Mr. Potter was laying senseless in their house, and his owl flatly refused to let them go to ask Tom for advice."

"What? But that's rubbish! Hedwig would never refuse to get help for Harry!"

"You're quite right, Miss Granger. That's why she fetched me."

"But--" Hermione tried again before Madam Pomfrey cut her off.

"You're trying to villianize these people for no reason, child. Consider, Mr. Potter had just told them about You Know Who. The family had already been threatened, and if I'm not mistaken, attacked." She turned to Dumbledore. "I found traces of what must have been a botched memory charm on the mother," she informed him gravely before returning her attention to Hermione. "They were grateful for my assistance, but they were taking no chances. Mr. Potter was not to be moved from their house until he was lucid enough to speak for himself." Pausing, Madam Pomfrey gave the garden of frozen wizards a pointed look, and reached into her robe pocket. "I trust you gentlemen will be able to control yourselves now," she said, with a negligent flick of her wand.

Suddenly released from stasis, Ron and the others completed interrupted running steps and flailed for balance before everyone was firmly on their feet again. Sirius in particular was not amused. "What were you thinking? How could you just leave Harry there?" he roared. "You should have brought him back here or taken him to St. Mungos immediately, regardless of what the Muggle wanted! She couldn't have stopped you!"

Ron swore the temperature in the hospital wing dropped a few degrees when Madam Pomfrey turned to face Harry's godfather, wand at the ready. "Unless you've completed your Mediwizard certification, do not presume to question me or tell me what's right for my patients, Sirius Black," she stated, frost coating every syllable. "If you're suggesting I left Mr. Potter behind lightly or against his will, you're gravely mistaken. When I first arrived Mr. Potter couldn't be moved."

"Well, what about later then? Surely you stabilized him before leaving?"

"I did."

"And?"

"I have no legal claim on him," Madam Pomfrey said with exaggerated patience. "Are you saying I should have kidnaped him?"

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "If that's what it takes. If legal claim is what you want, tell me where he is and I'll go get him."

"You can try I suppose, but I wish you luck."

"Wait..." Professor Lupin said, reaching out and almost absently and hauling Sirius back. "Are you're saying Harry doesn't want to come back to us?" he asked, sounding slightly hurt.

"I haven't been able to say much of anything, now have I?" Madam Pomfrey countered, putting one hand on her hip. "If you lot will stop interrupting and let me explain, I think most of your questions will be answered. I'm only telling you this much because Mr. Potter said I could. He reckoned you'd be worried, but keep in mind this is privileged information." After a few seconds of silence, she nodded and went on.

"As I said, the bird's instincts were good. Moving Mr. Potter at that point could have been disastrous. We're quite lucky Mrs. Wright had sense enough to realize or at least suspect a Muggle hospital couldn't have dealt with the boy's symptoms. That brings us to the heart of the matter. I couldn't move Mr. Potter at that point because he had completely left his body."

That got Ron's attention. "What?" he gasped, earning an irritated look from the Mediwitch.

"You're taking Divination, are you not, Mr. Weasley? Surely Professor Trelawney has mentioned Astral travel."

Ron shared an incredulous look with Hermione. "Well, yes," he finally admitted, "but we--Harry and I..." He paused, trying to get his mind around the concept. "We thought it was all rubbish."

"Not completely, Mr. Weasley," Madam Pomfrey corrected, after sharing an ironic look with Professor McGonagall. "Astral travel is possible. Dangerous and not terribly common perhaps, but possible."

"Yes," Arthur Weasley put in, making Ron look up in surprise. He watched as his father moved to his mother's bedside and gently took her hand. "Harry came to us at Arabella Figg's house, and told us the Burrow was under attack. You Know Who had a plan no one expected. I'm sorry to say it took him a little time to convince us his warning was valid."

Ron squirmed uncomfortably as horrid might-have-beens teased his imagination. Professor Sprout had explained his mum and Ginny had been lower in the house and had simply gotten a stronger dose of the Death Eaters' gas, but it was still odd to see them so still and quiet.

Madam Pomfrey frowned. "How long did it take?" she asked, providing a welcome distraction. Following her gaze, Ron saw she was looking very intently at his father.

Arthur Weasley frowned in concentration. "Lord, I don't know, Poppy," he said, spreading his hands. "Ten minutes, perhaps? Certainly no more than twenty."

Madam Pomfrey hummed, tapping her lips with her forefinger. "That wouldn't be it, then. Too short. The point is, Mr. Potter stayed out longer than was strictly wise. His Astral Link became dangerously overextended, and the stress on his body was significant. At one point his temperature rose to such a degree I had to transfigure his bed into a bath so we could try to cool him off.

"That must have been when he got all quiet at Arabella's, after Arthur, Remus, and Mad-Eye left," Sirius speculated, glancing at Dumbledore who nodded his agreement.

Madam Pomfrey was not impressed. "Am I to understand that Mr. Potter stayed extended after delivering his warning?" she demanded. When Sirius nodded, she shook her head in exasperation. "Of all the thoughtless, irresponsible--you should have sent him back immediately!" she cried, unconsciously throwing his own accusation back in his teeth.

"That wasn't exactly my choice to make!" Sirius flared, looking mortally offended. "Harry wanted to make sure everyone got out of the Burrow all right! Fawkes held him in place until we got Shacklebolt's firecall!"

"I believe Harry said Fawkes agreed to hold him in the Physical Realm as long as possible," Dumbledore clarified, holding up a cautioning finger. "The fact that he was able to hear the firecall--or most of it--is mere coincidence."

"Well, I must say he's a bird of his word," Madam Pomfrey replied, shaking her head. "I didn't want to alarm Mrs. Wright, she was already frightened enough as it was, but another few seconds and...well, I'm really not sure what would have happened. Most of my patients have the sense to keep their spirits inside their bodies where they belong."

Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat. "In Harry's defense, what happened last night was unusual even for an Astral Projection. Furthermore, I'm not certain this 'ability' of his is entirely voluntary. In any case, it seems some instruction would be prudent. I'll discuss it with him once he recovers."

"Yes, that would probably be best," Madam Pomfrey agreed, "for my sake if not his own. Mr. Potter may thrive on these sorts of adventures, but my heart's not what it once was."

"Is Harry all right, Madam Pomfrey?" Hermione asked quietly.

"He's on the mend, Miss Granger," the Mediwitch replied to Ron's great relief. "He's still ill of course. Weak, disoriented, and dreadfully sore, but I don't think he suffered any permanent damage."

"Thank the Lord for that," Ron's father said wholeheartedly.

"Indeed," Professor Dumbledore seconded, before turning back to the Mediwitch. "Poppy, did Mr. Potter happen to mention why he's so reluctant to return to us?" Ron noted the headmaster was suddenly very serious with no trace of his trademark humor. He was actually

acting like someone about to be told something they desperately don't want to hear.

Madam Pomfrey hesitated, then sighed. "Mr. Potter fears you intend to send him back to his Muggle relatives," she said regretfully. Ron was shocked, but Professor Dumbledore didn't seem to be.

"I suspected as much. I fear I haven't listened to the boy enough in the past."

"You aren't alone in that, Albus," Madam Pomfrey said, giving him a sympathetic look before addressing the room at large. "He's also convinced the lot of you are irrevocably cross with him, and no amount of talking on my part could convince him otherwise," she stated, touching off another uproar.

"Then you definitely should have brought him back!" Sirius shouted over a chorus of general agreement. "We could have sorted the mess once he arrived!"

"No, no, NO!" Madam Pomfrey thundered, punctuating the last with a flash and a BANG from the end of her wand. That's where you're all wrong," she said into the resulting silence. "This may come as a surprise to all of you, but Harry Potter isn't made of stone. He's a flesh and blood wizard, and he has limits just like anyone else. I know his fears are probably groundless, but they're very real to him and his well being has to take precedence. The Wrights have cared for him like one of their own, and there's no reason to believe they won't continue to do so. I wanted to calm him, not add to his stress, so I backed down. Good thing, too, it seems," she continued turning to Dumbledore. "If I hadn't I might have found myself forcibly ejected from the premises."

Ron glanced at Hermione and his father, unsurprised at the small smiles tugging on their lips. Professor Sprout, who was not privy to the joke seemed shocked. "Surely they didn't threaten you, Poppy!"

"Not directly," Madam Pomfrey clarified, "perhaps not even intentionally, but something very strange happened. When I was

trying to calm Mr. Potter, I felt the air tighten around me--like the sensation one feels before Apparating. I thought it might be accidental magic from Mr. Potter at first, but now I think it might have been Mrs. Wright. She was appalled at Mr. Potter's state, and wanted me away from him immediately. It was written all over her face. When I changed tactics with Mr. Potter and assured him he didn't have to go immediately if he didn't wish it, the pressure eased."

"You should have Stupefied her--or are you suddenly frightened of Muggles and untrained Half Bloods?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Mr. Black," Madam Pomfrey scoffed. "In fact, you have that same untrained Half Blood to thank for Mr. Potter's eventual cooperation."

"Wait...cooperation?"

"That's right. Mrs. Wright convinced Mr. Potter to meet Professor Dumbledore at the Leaky Cauldron. The date is a little tentative--it depends on how long it takes the children to recover. The potions I gave Mr. Potter and the Wright girls should have them back on their feet in a few days. I told Mrs. Wright to send Professor Dumbledore a message with Mr. Potter's owl, or leave word with Tom when they were ready to come."

Dumbledore inclined his head gravely. "Thank you, Poppy. I'm sure we'll get everything sorted then."

"Have a care that you don't frighten them," she warned. "I'll be very cross if Mr. Potter or the Wright girls suffers a relapse, or I have to reassemble you from being splinched."

"I shall be the very soul of courtesy, dear lady."

Madam Pomfrey wasn't impressed. "See that you are," she said, lifting an imperious eyebrow. "In the meantime, since Mr. Potter wasn't able to join you immediately, Mrs. Wright was kind enough to send these along," she continued, reaching into a robe pocket and producing a stack of photos. "I'm sure they'll calm your fears better than my words ever could."

"This is Harry," Fred stated decisively a few minutes later when the photos had made their way around to them. "Look here," he said, pointing to a photo of the boy in question sitting in the floor with the younger of the two girls, "Harry does that all the time."

"No glasses, though. Not in any of them," Hermione noted flipping quickly through the stack of photos. "Oh, look Ron!" she exclaimed, stopping at one. "It's the flute Hagrid made, remember? I didn't even know Harry still had it."

"He still has it," Ron affirmed, studying the photo. By the looks on the girls' faces, Harry was playing the little flute for them. Wow. He hadn't even realized Harry bothered with it.

"Ah!" said George, holding up a photo of Harry holding a doll in one hand, and a dress for it in the other. Fred took in the picture with a glance, before giving his brother a sly wink.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Blackmail."

"Definitely."

"Excellent!"

"Oh, you two," Hermione scolded, snatching the picture away. Grinning, she considered the rather wild-eyed boy staring up at her from the photo.

Mrs. Granger chuckled as she peered over her daughter's shoulder. "Oh my, that's a good one. Whoever took it caught it just at the right time."

Hermione shook her head. "It's just hard to believe Harry's getting along so well without his glasses."

"Perhaps he's wearing his contacts--" her mother suggested before interrupting herself. "Contacts!" she repeated, beginning to smile.

"Of course!" Hermione said, slapping her forehead. "We're so used to Harry having glasses it just doesn't occur to us..."

"What are you talking about?" Ron finally asked.

"I think I know how Harry changed his eyecolor!"

"How?"

"Look at the pictures. Harry isn't wearing his glasses in any of them, and we know Harry doesn't see well without his glasses."

"Yeah?" Ron prompted, wishing she'd get on with it already.

"Three words, Ron. Color contact lenses. They're Muggle things so they wouldn't react to magic!"
Closed.

Of course.

The Ministry doesn't open for business for another hour or more, you great dunce!

Percy hesitated, drumming his fingers on the doorframe, then slowly withdrew the master key he carried as a member of the Minister's staff. He looked both ways down the deserted hallway, feeling very much like a naughty boy with his hand in the cookie jar, before slipping the key into the lock. He'd fetch the folder and take it up to the Minister's office. There had to be some kind of misunderstanding...some mistake!

Shaking his head at his father and Professor Dumbledore for their unnecessary theatrics, Percy headed over to the cabinet where the "P" folders were housed. Once the Minister knew what was going on, they could discuss the available options and decide what to do in a calm, rational fashion. Harry would probably be made a ward of the Ministry, at least in the short term. His father had mentioned taking him in...

Paris...Park...Peabody...
Pottberg...Poundstone...Prewitt...

Plumtree...Porch...Posternock...

Bother, the librarian must have mis-filed the bloody thing... Percy groused, starting over at "Owens" and searching each tab individually. It had to be in here, he'd chatted with the librarians a few moments after he'd returned it, and watched while the folder was re-filed.

Powers...Pratt...Prizzi...

Puffenberger...Purtee...Pyles...Qadri...Qaiyumi...

Percy blinked, re-read the tabs, and blinked again as the enormity of the situation hit him. "It's not here! It's gone!" he blurted in dismay, running a scanning eye over the "O" and "Q" files just for good measure.

He stood there a moment, mind blank with shock, before drawing his wand. "Accio Harry Potter's folder!" he said, growing more agitated than ever when nothing came zooming into his hand. The folder wasn't misfiled, it was gone! But where was it?

Or who had it? Heart beginning to pound, Percy shoved his wand back in his pocket, stopping dead in his tracks when the only possible answer occurred to him. Dumbledore! Dumbledore must have come back for it! he gibbered, heading back to the door.

That's it. This has gone entirely too far, he decided, stepping out into the hall and locking the door behind him. Even if it means answering awkward questions, I have to tell Minister Fudge what's going on straightaway!

Chapter 34: Meeting at the Leaky Cauldron

July 28, 1995

"WHATTA YA MEAN YOU'LL TELL HARRY I SAID 'HELLO'?!"

Remus Lupin gave silent thanks for his cottage's rather isolated location, before turning and giving Sirius Black his best "Pipe Down, Loudmouth" glare.

It worked as well as it ever had, which is to say Sirius wasn't fazed in the least. "I'LL SAY 'HELLO' TO HARRY MYSELF, THANKS," he bellowed, stomping over to Remus and wagging a finger under his nose, "BECAUSE I'M GOING TO THE LEAKY BLOODY CAULDRON WITH YOU!"

"No." Remus kept his voice low and even--a trick that had sometimes calmed his Hogwarts classes. "You aren't."

Sirius flushed and jutted his jaw out, looking very much like the headstrong boy he'd been in school.

Stifling a sigh, Remus met his friend's angry glare. In a lot of ways Sirius was that same boy. When they'd first been reunited, he'd simply been thankful Sirius had escaped with his sanity, and was amazed at how unchanged he'd seemed. It wasn't until later that he realized Sirius was a little too unchanged.

This particular side effect was both insidious and profound. It had taken quite some time and a few chats with Dumbledore before Remus had been able to put his finger on exactly what was bothering him. Sirius had all his mental facilities about him, and he'd matured physically, of course, but emotionally... Sometimes he was amazingly rational. Other times he seemed to have the maturity level of someone still in his late teens.

Remus allowed himself a mental eyeroll. Rather like a certain Head of House I know... Bit rich, really. Sometimes I think Harry's the most levelheaded of the lot!

Still, he had to admit, Sirius had made remarkable progress in the last year or so. When the situation demanded it, he could apply himself to a problem with amazing focus and determination. Perhaps in part it was because he had Harry to concentrate on, and a goal to work toward. Now was a perfect example. Sirius very obviously wanted to continue the argument, or perhaps take a swing at something to ease his frustration. Instead, he was fighting to bring himself back under control.

"I'll be fine!" he insisted, calmer but sounding like he was having to work for every word. "I'll stay in my Animagus form. No one will know."

Remus shook his head. "No, Sirius. Dumbledore thinks it's too dangerous."

"Dumbledore!" Sirius' face twisted into a mutinous scowl. "Is that what this is about? The old man doesn't think I can handle myself?"

"It isn't that and you know it!"

"Don't I? He didn't think it was too dangerous for me to gather the Old Crowd and be on that stakeout with you a few weeks ago!"

Remus ran a hand through his hair and struggled with his own frustration. "That stakeout was out of the country, Padfoot! No one there was looking for a fugitive wizard or a black dog! About the Old Crowd...that was before the rat blabbed your Animagus form to Voldemort and his lot."

Sirius made a derisive noise and cut the air with his hand. "Do you have any idea how many black dogs there are in Britain? Who cares if Snake-Face knows my Animagus form?"

"You should you stupid git!" Remus felt his hackles rise as he walked slowly towards Sirius. "If you'll calm down and bloody think a minute, you'll see the old man's right! Yes, there are a lot of black dogs in Britain, but how many hang around Dumbledore, or me, or Harry for that matter? If you're seen with any of us it'll be a dead giveaway and they'll know exactly which black dog to go after!"

Sirius crossed his arms and glared at Remus. "I can take care of myself, thanks."

"Dammit, Sirius, this isn't a game! You get caught and the consequences will be a hell of a lot worse than serving detention for McGonagall. You could end up dead or worse!"

"I was doing fine!"

"Yeah, before you came back to Britain!" As he continued his advance, Remus caught Buckbeak out of the corner of his eye. The hippogriff was stretched out on the back lawn, sunning himself. "Maybe you should just get on Buckbeak and go back to where you were last summer. Go back and stay there until we can get this sorted out."

Sirius looked like he'd just been told the moon was made of green cheese. "What?! No way! I'm no coward!"

Remus blinked, thrown by the sudden topic shift. "Coward? Who said you were a coward?"

Sirius lifted his chin again. "I'm not going to leave the country when Voldemort's back and Harry's in so much danger!" Remus opened his mouth to argue, but Sirius cut him off. "It was different before. I didn't like leaving, but it wasn't so bad. I thought Hogwarts was safe, and Harry had his blood protection. Besides, what if Flitwick's right and the folder's transferred guardianship to that Muggle family? I won't stand by and let Harry get placed in a home where he's unwanted! Once was enough!"

"No one wants that, Paddy. Dumbledore won't allow it," Remus tried to reassure, wincing when haunted blue eyes met his own.

"Won't he Remus?"

"I won't allow it then!" Remus snarled, the wolf and his own Gryffindor bravado leaping out of his mouth before he could stop them. Sirius

stared at him for a couple of heartbeats, then chuckled and cracked a little half-grin.

"You're a little scary when you do that."

Remus snorted. "So you always said."

"So did James," Sirius pointed out.

And Peter hung uncomfortably in the air between them, felt but not spoken aloud. Remus wondered for perhaps the millionth time, what happened to the boy he used to tutor at Hogwarts, but a glance at the clock brought him back to the present with a bump.

Damn! If he didn't hurry he was going to be late. "So you won't be coming to the Leaky Cauldron with me, right?" he prodded, prepared to Stupefy Sirius if he had to.

Sirius opened his mouth as if to continue arguing, then stopped with an arrested expression on his face. As Remus watched in amazement, he closed his mouth and shrugged. "Fine."

"What?"

"Fine, I said. Fine. You win. I won't go to the Leaky Cauldron with you. Happy?"

Remus raised his eyebrows. "You won't?"

Sirius responded with an irritated look, and impatient little flipping gestures. "I just said I wouldn't, didn't I? G'wan. Scram. Enjoy yourself."

Remus wasn't altogether sure he trusted Sirius, okay, he was sure he didn't trust Sirius, but it was getting late, and he wanted at least one of them to be there for Harry. From the sound of things, the boy was expecting to be clapped in irons the second he dared show himself, and that would never do. Decision made, Remus took a pinch of Floo Powder. He'd just have nip over and get back as quickly as he could. "Be back soon, alright?"

"Sure, Moony."

Sirius was the very image of casual unconcern, but Remus caught the subtle tang of anticipation in his friend's scent--something he remembered all too well from his Hogwarts days. He's definitely up to something, but what? Remus hesitated. Was Sirius planning a retaliatory prank? The werewolf cringed imagining what his house might look like upon his return, then shrugged deciding it didn't matter. As long as he stayed put, Sirius could charm the place neon pink and Slytherin green if he wanted to. This time Harry had to come first.

"Look there, he's getting ready to take a bite," Harry said, pointing at a picture of a rather disinclined-looking creature. "Do you think he's going to like it?" he asked, smiling down at Becky who was snuggled against his side with her favorite blanket and cuddly bear.

"Nah, he'll probably hate it," Kitty teased from his other side. She was obviously trying to get a rise out of her sister, but Becky wasn't taking the bait. Harry gave the older girl a sympathetic glance. It was a bit off-putting to see the active, happy baby so still and quiet. Madam Pomfrey had dosed Kitty and himself with a couple of foul-tasting concoctions plus a healthy sip of Pepper-Up Potion, so they were mostly recovered. Becky wasn't old enough to tolerate the full strength versions, so she was still on the mend. He and Kitty were trying to perk her up by reading one of her favorite books. They'd even divided up the parts. Kitty was reading the little bloke's lines, and he was playing the poor chap who wasn't too keen on green eggs and ham, but it was only working up to a point.

Harry regarded the book in his hands with a certain ironic amusement as he recounted how the larger fellow did like the dish once he'd tried it, wondering what Hermione would think if she could see him now. He'd never really understood her fascination with books and reading. To him, books were tools--things to be consulted when writing an essay. Hermione read even when she didn't have to--called it fun for Heaven's sake!

"Mum and Dad started reading to me before I could even understand the words properly," she'd told him once when he'd asked her about it.

He'd nodded his acceptance, but hadn't really understood the explanation or the soft expression that had stolen across her face. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia hadn't put as much emphasis on books and reading as the Grangers seemed to, possibly because they didn't do a lot of pleasure reading themselves. Harry had a few dim memories of Aunt Petunia reading bedtime stories when he and Dudley were very young, but the practice had been abandoned early on. Harry couldn't recall why exactly, but he suspected Dudley's preference of the telly and video games probably had a lot to do with it.

That wasn't true of the Wright children. Kitty and Becky liked their games and videos, true, but both of them also loved to read and be read to. Harry had thought that odd at first, especially in Kitty's case. She was perfectly capable of reading to herself, after all. Now he was beginning to understand that it was less about the story read, and more about sharing, closeness, comfort and attention. He'd already figured out the giving end of that, but the notion had been firmly reinforced when he'd awakened in the transfigured tub a few nights ago. Harry hadn't really appreciated the feeling of being cared for until Steve shooed the women out so he could get into some dry pajamas, and Janet had read to him until he fell asleep. Shuddering inwardly Harry gave silent thanks that they'd at least left him in his pants. He didn't think he'd ever be able to face Janet again if he'd been stripped completely starkers.

Speaking of Steve and Janet, Harry had to admit the last few days had been a learning experience. Living with the Wright family for several days was a slightly different dynamic from his previous visits. This time he'd been there long enough to see them not always on their best behavior. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia tended to present a united front in all things. If one was calm, they both were calm. If one was angry, they both were angry. Steve and Janet were slightly different. If one crossed over into true anger or upset, the other one tended to be calm. Given their temperaments, that was probably a good thing. Grinning fondly, Harry peeked over the top of the storybook, watching as Janet buzzed around the room. It was clearly Steve's turn to be the reasonable one.

"Has everyone been to the bathroom?" Janet suddenly asked, sparing a glance at the clock.

"Everybody's good, Jannie," Steve reassured.

"Good. Do you have everything, Sparky?"

Harry indicated his bag and Hedwig's cage which were packed and ready to go. "Right there, Janet."

Janet nodded, then continued to pace distractedly around the living room. "Toys, books, medicine, blanket," she muttered, counting off items on her fingers before stopping to address her husband directly. "Steve, do you think we might need the portable playpen?"

"We should be okay, babe. If Becky gets tired before we're done you or I can bring her home."

"I suppose. Oh! Snacks!"

"Janet, we're going to the Leaky Cauldron."

"Oh. Right. I wonder what they want to speak to us about."

Steve shrugged. "Kitty, I'd imagine," he said, walking over to the couch and taking a seat by his oldest daughter. "Didn't the letter say something about Salem?"

"Yeah," Janet responded absently, stuffing two packets of tissues into her already bulging diaper bag. "And Harry's school."

Harry exchanged an amused look with Steve. "Is she going to be able to lift that thing?" he murmured, making sure Janet couldn't hear him.

Steve chuckled. "She's tougher than she looks, but if she has trouble, that's what I'm for. Pack mule extra ordinaire," he responded with a wink. Raising his voice, he called, "Jannie, we're going to be walking a few blocks up the street, not crossing the Himalayas."

"I want to make sure I have everything I might need. Becky's still not one hundred percent."

Harry bit his lower lip, now feeling slightly ashamed of himself. "You don't have to come with me, you know," he offered, glancing at the listless girl again.

Janet rolled her eyes. "I know I don't have to. I choose to. Besides, Professor Dumbledore asked to speak to us, remember?"

"Oh, right." Harry stifled a snort with some difficulty. How could he forget? Janet had sent Hedwig off to arrange a time and date to meet. When she'd returned with a note from the Headmaster, Janet had been almost beside herself with delighted surprise.

"Hi, sweetie, what do you have there?"

"Aw, look! Who's the smart girl?"

"Janet..."

"Who's the fastest, bravest, most beautiful owl?"

Remembering made Harry smile. Actually, her gushing hadn't bothered him nearly as much as the superior looks Hedwig had thrown his way. "You see? This is how an owl is properly appreciated," she'd seemed to say from her perch on Janet's arm.

As if his thought had summoned her, Hedwig flew past, whacking him quite deliberately with her wing. "Hey!" Harry objected, rubbing the side of his head, while Steve laughed at him.

"Serves you right for picking on my lady. Oh, don't even try, I know what you were thinking about," he grinned, holding up a hand when Harry opened his mouth to object. Defeated, Harry crossed his arms and slouched grumpily into the sofa cushions while Kitty giggled into her hand. Steve waggled his eyebrows at the three of them, then returned to the business of reassuring his wife.

"We'd both like to hear what the teachers have to say, agreed?"

Janet looked torn, then sighed. "Yes."

"Well, there you go. Becky should be okay for a little while, isn't that right, beautiful?" he asked, reaching over and tweaking the tiny girl's nose.

Unable to hold his disgruntled look, Harry felt himself starting to grin again when Becky gave her father a little smile and held her arms up in a silent request to be held.

Janet was still considering her bag. "Do you think they'll make us wait? Maybe I should bring a book, too."

Steve shook his head. "Janet, God's truth, if you put one more thing in there, I think you might rip the seams. We'll be fine."

Janet ran an appraising eye over the bag, then sighed. "I guess you're right. It's time to go, anyway."

As they headed toward the Leaky Cauldron, Harry felt profoundly ill at ease. His headband and contacts had never seemed so inadequate. They'd know who he was, of course, but he felt the need to hide behind his disguise. The Wrights had never been seen in the company of Harry Potter, and he intended to keep it that way. Jim Patterson was dangerous enough.

Still, as glad as he was for their company--and he was glad no matter how much he tried to convince himself otherwise--Harry admitted he was a little unsure about how things were going to go. Was Professor Dumbledore coming alone? That would be preferable, but not likely. Harry didn't reckon Sirius would stand for that. At the very least, he imagined Profess--Remus would be there.

The Weasleys and the Grangers would probably be there too, Harry mused. Steve had run into Mr. Weasley when he'd gone to the Leaky Cauldron to get pumpkin juice, bring Tom up to date, and pick up a few more clothes. From what Steve said, Harry concluded that the Weasleys would be staying at the Leaky Cauldron until the structural damage to the Burrow was repaired. Hermione and her parents seemed to be there as a precautionary measure.

Of course this begged the question, "How big is this meeting going to be?" Harry wasn't sure if the Weasleys and the Grangers would be there or not, but he knew they'd want to speak to him after the fact. Ron and Hermione had said as much in the notes they'd sent back with Steve. Harry considered this as he continued up the street, feeling excited and terrified by turns. Everyone seemed willing enough to forgive him. On the other hand, the conversation could turn ugly.

Then there was the problem of his lodging. Would he have to give up Tom's old room? When he realized the answer to that was probably "yes," Harry felt his stomach sink. He'd grown more attached to the place than he'd thought.

A gentle hand on his shoulder made him jump slightly. Embarrassed, he turned to face Janet. "Okay?" she asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

Harry started to sigh and roll his eyes, then stopped himself and nodded instead. She and Steve had taken very good care of him when he'd been so wretchedly ill, and to be fair, he'd scared the pants off both of them when Fawkes had held him outside his body. "I'm okay, Janet. Just nerves, I suppose. Can't say I'm exactly looking forward to this."

Steve raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Don't let your friends hear you say that. They certainly want to see you!"

"I want to see them, I just don't fancy all the hard feelings I'm going to have to work through first," Harry admitted. Steve clapped a hand on his other shoulder and shook him slightly.

"Give 'em a chance, bud. Arthur Weasley seemed like a nice guy, and Professor Dumbledore was more than willing to accommodate our schedule. Tom even said we could use one of the parlors, and he'd put a privacy spell on it for us."

Harry brightened a bit at that. At least he shouldn't have to worry about someone overhearing. And anyway, it was too late now. The Leaky Cauldron was mere footsteps away. Stopping, Harry looked at

the little pub and fought with a wild urge to turn and run. Just about anywhere was sounding better than here at the moment.

Surprisingly, given Janet's tendency to pick up on things, it was Steve that seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. "Come on," he said, half chiding, half coaxing. "You have to own up to your mistakes. The sooner this is over, the better you'll feel."

"Steve's right, I have a good feeling about this," Janet agreed, giving Harry an encouraging smile. "Everything will work out, you'll see."

"If you say so," Harry said dubiously, reaching for the door. He stopped, hand frozen in midair, when he saw a notice attached to it.

The Leaky Cauldron's main dining room will be closed from 2:00 - 4:00 pm this afternoon.

We will re-open at 4:15 pm and dinner service will begin at 5:00 pm.

Please proceed around the building to the back courtyard for access to Diagon Alley. Guests of the Leaky Cauldron may use the back entrance to gain entry to their rooms.

We regret any inconvenience, and appreciate your patience.

The Management

"Ah, good," Steve's voice came over his shoulder. "Tom said he'd do his best to keep things quiet for you. He wanted you to be comfortable."

Impossible, thought Harry, looking at the door like it lead into a dungeon, even as he nodded. Still, he had to admit, he appreciated the effort. A crowd of witches and wizards was the last thing he wanted to deal with right now. Well, okay, other than the crowd that was probably already in there, that is.

While he was mulling this over, Kitty slipped by him and tugged on the door. "It's locked!"

"Hmm." Harry saw Janet glance at her wristwatch. "This is when we agreed to meet, I doubt it's another party. Knock, sweetie," she instructed, though whether she was speaking to Harry or Katrina wasn't clear.

Kitty was the nearer of the two, so she raised her hand, only to lower it again when the door cracked open and Tom peeked out. When he saw Harry, his face split into a broad smile.

"Welcome back, lad! Feeling better I hope?"

Nodding, Harry felt an answering smile form on his face. Steve and Janet were great, no question, but he'd missed Tom and the Leaky Cauldron while he'd been away. "Much better, thanks."

"Good, good." Tom ran an appraising eye over the rest of the group, stopping when he came to Becky. "Oh, dear. Are you still sick, love?"

"She's better," Steve assured him. "Just not quite there yet."

"Poor lamb. Come in so we can get on with this. Sooner she's tucked back into bed the better, I'd say." Turning back to Harry, Tom reached for his bag and Hedwig's cage. "I'll take these for you. Professor Dumbledore is at table three. Best not keep him waiting."

Harry looked toward the indicated table and saw Professor Dumbledore rising from his chair along with the Hogwarts House Heads and another woman he didn't know. Well, this was it. For better or for worse, the cat was out of the bag now. "I suppose we should go say hello," he murmured, glancing back at the Wrights.

"Sure, bud," Steve said easily. "So the Gandalf look-alike is Professor Dumbledore?"

Harry frowned. "Gandalf?"

Steve blinked in mock amazement, then gave Harry a big grin. "Oh, man, when you finish that little novel of Jannie's, do I have a story for you!"

Harry made a noncommittal noise, grateful for the offer, but not certain he was going to be able to start another reading project. Not the way Snape was glaring at him.

"Friendly looking bunch," Janet murmured behind him, then there was no more time for talking. They were standing in front of the teacher's table.

Harry met Dumbledore's somber blue eyes and resisted an urge to squirm. "Hello, Professor Dumbledore."

Dumbledore responded with a small nod. "Good day, Mr. Potter. Feeling better I trust?"

"Yes, sir." Harry took a step to the side, then indicated the family behind him. "I'd like to introduce you to the Wright family, Professor. This is Steve and Janet, and their children Katrina and Rebecca. Steve, Janet, this is Professor Dumbledore, my headmaster, Professor McGonagall, deputy headmistress, and head of Gryffindor House, Professor Flitwick, head of Ravenclaw House, Professor Sprout, head of Hufflepuff House, Professor Snape, head of Slytherin House, and--" Harry stumbled when he realized he didn't know the last person's name. She came to his rescue, though, smiling and extending a hand.

"Professor Abigail Penstone, Mr. Potter. Head Registrar of the Salem Witches' Institute," she said, as Harry automatically clasped her hand. Moving out from behind the table, she greeted Steve and Janet. "Mr. Wright, Mrs. Wright, the Hogwarts professors and I thought we might be able to answer some of your questions about our schools while Professor Dumbledore has a brief chat with Mr. Potter."

Steve and Janet looked at each other, then at Harry. "Is that all right with you, sweetie?" Janet asked, as Hogwarts heads of house filed out from behind the table to join Professor Penstone.

Harry smiled, bolstered by the idea that Janet would tell five senior professors that they could bloody well wait a minute if he wanted her to. He might have been tempted if this was Professor Snape he was

facing off with, but he trusted Dumbledore not to do anything too painful. Well, physically, anyway. "I'll be fine."

"Okay." Janet reached out and gave his arm a little squeeze before allowing Steve to lead her to a neighboring table the teachers had already gathered around.

Taking a deep breath, Harry turned his attention back to table three, and Professor Dumbledore. Calm, blue eyes still studied him, but the Hogwarts headmaster didn't seem angry. In fact, if Harry wasn't grossly mistaken, his headmaster seemed intrigued.

"Remarkable." Dumbledore came around the table and very gently touched the pads of his first two fingers under Harry's chin. "Quite remarkable. There's just enough of a change..."

Harry had nothing to say to that, so he stood uncertainly before the older wizard.

Dumbledore's hand fell away from his face and disappeared into one of his robe pockets. "Well, I suppose we should get on with this," he said, a faint note of regret in his voice that made Harry feel sick inside.

This is it. he thought, expecting an expulsion scroll, or worse, some sort of magical wand snapper. Dumbledore's hand reappeared, but to Harry's surprise, it was holding an open Honeydukes bag full of familiar yellow candies. "Lemon drop?"

Harry glanced from the bag of sweets to his headmaster's face. "I'm not being expelled?" he asked cautiously.

Dumbledore gave him a sad smile. "No, dear boy. You are not going to be expelled. You haven't performed one hint of underage magic though your entire ordeal. You might also be interested to know, that unless you expressly wish it, you will not be returned to your aunt and uncle's care."

That definitely got Harry's attention. "I-I'm not? But where will I go?" Do I have to go anywhere?

"That is one of the things I wished to discuss with you." Professor Dumbledore indicated the table. "Please, be seated, I'm afraid the explanation could take some time."

Feeling a little overwhelmed, Harry nodded and reached for a chair, turning at the last second when the fireplace flashed green. Before Harry had time to do more than blink, a streak of black fur came racing across the dining room, and two great forepaws hit him squarely in the chest. After that things got a little confused. The last clear memory Harry had was angry-sounding barks, Janet's horrified shriek, and all the air leaving his lungs in a great rush as he collided painfully with the Leaky Cauldron's floor.

"What's happening?"

"Are they there yet, Remus?"

"Let me see, Professor Lupin!"

Remus threw a harassed look over his shoulder. "Back off you lot! I can barely see or hear anything with you all making so much noise. Harry and the Muggle family just arrived. They're walking over to Dumbledore's table."

"I don't see why Professor Dumbledore won't let us greet Harry properly," Ron complained. Since his back was to the room at large, Remus allowed himself an exasperated eye roll. Now that he thought of it, having everyone wait in the parlor until Harry and his Muggle friends entered was a feat only Dumbledore could have achieved.

Hermione sighed audibly, making Remus chuckle when she said, "Oh, Ronald!"

"I think he wants to make sure Steve and his family aren't frightened off by this crowd," Arthur Weasley put in, deftly cutting off the squabble threatening to erupt. His wife, on the other hand, wasn't so easily pacified.

"Rubbish!" she scoffed.

"Now, now, dear, magical training isn't a small decision, and there are quite a few of us," Hermione's mother said.

"I suppose."

Remus shook his head. Molly's acceptance of this whole thing was shaky at best. If the Burrow hadn't been damaged, he reckoned she'd be more than happy to pack Harry up and take him home with her. Even now he suspected she'd insist Harry give up wherever he'd been living and stay with her family at the Leaky Cauldron.

Returning his attention to the scene in the dining room, Remus noticed the group had split up. The other teachers were talking to the Muggles while Dumbledore dealt with Harry. Even better, some of the tension was beginning to leave the boy's shoulders. Remus was beginning to think that this might turn out all right after all, when a complication showed up. A complication named Padfoot.

Remus tried to shout a warning, but it was too late. Sirius just never seemed to realize how big he was as Padfoot. He'd toppled all his friends at Hogwarts at one time or another, and with the exception of Peter, they'd all been fair sized boys.

Harry never stood a chance. When taken by surprise by about 150 pounds of excited dog, he went down like a ton of bricks.

"That idiot!" Remus grimaced when the Muggle mother's terrified shriek reached his eardrums, but to be fair he couldn't really blame her. Sirius never appreciated how ferocious he sounded either. The literal translation of the black dog's barks, snarls and growls was most likely "Where have you been? Why didn't you write? We've all been so worried!" but to the uninitiated, Padfoot appeared ready to rip Harry's throat out. "Stay in here," he barked to the other occupants of the parlor, rather amazed when they actually complied.

Shaking his head, Remus stalked out of the parlor, determined to pull Sirius off Harry, but the Muggle woman got there first. Surprised, Remus watched in amazement as her bag collided solidly with Sirius' ribs, knocking him off Harry's chest. Well, that's one way to do it, Remus thought, quickening his stride, then slowing down again.

Sirius did sort of have this coming, the great git. 'I won't come to the Leaky Cauldron with you' indeed! Maybe he'd let her get a few licks in... Maybe she'd let him claim a couple of them.

"Remus! Stop this or I will!" Arthur Weasley hissed in his ear. "Harry doesn't need to deal with this and the Wrights are frightened to death!"

"Bad dog! Bad dog!" The mother was swinging the bag for all she was worth now, though by her scent panic was driving her on rather than any true malice. To his left Remus saw the father had lifted both his daughters onto a table--the little one pushchair and all--and was hurrying towards his wife. Stopping a second, he glanced back at Harry had been helped into a sitting position by Professor Dumbledore, but Harry waved him on.

Watching, Remus felt a guilty flush bloom on his cheeks. Arthur was right. Harry looked horrified, and Professors McGonagall, Sprout and Flitwick seemed to have their hands full between calming the Wright girls and preventing Snape and Abigail Penstone from leaping into the fray.

"Jannie! Janet!" Remus snorted in spite of himself when the mother swung around at the sound of her name and nearly flattened her husband with the bag. "Criminey, woman! Gimme that! Now get back!" he ordered, shoving her behind him.

Responding to the more overt threat, Remus hurried forward, leaving Arthur standing a few feet in front of the parlor door. He wasn't sure Sirius would make it if the other Muggle decided to have a go at him. "Hang on! Just a moment! Please, there's been a misunderstanding!"

"Is this your dog?" the Muggle father asked. Sirius, Remus noted, seemed okay but was wisely staying down.

"I..." Remus moved to stand by Sirius and searched for an acceptable story. "I'm looking after him for a friend. Terribly sorry. He just doesn't know his own size--thinks he's still a puppy."

"What in--Remus, really! I'm shocked!" Tom scolded, coming out of the kitchen with trays of tea and biscuits floating in his wake. "You know I don't allow animals in here! I'm afraid you'll both have to leave."

"No, wait..."

Harry...

"Please, Tom, can't he stay? I...I haven't seen either of them all summer."

The mother's defensive demeanor slipped somewhat. "You know this dog?"

Harry nodded earnestly. "He didn't mean to knock me down, he was just excited."

"Excited? He looked about ready to tear you to pieces!"

Harry fidgeted a bit. "He was probably scolding me. I think I might have worried him a bit."

The mother crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "The dog was worried."

Remus saw Harry glance at Sirius. "I think so." Responding to his godson's words, or perhaps the uncertain note in his quiet voice, Sirius immediately sat up, bobbed his head, and barked once. Seeming heartened by the positive response, Harry smiled and held out a hand. Taking his cue, Sirius immediately trotted over to him and gave him a huge, slobbery lick on the cheek.

Remus beamed in what he hoped was his most charming manner. "There, you see?" he said, as Harry scratched a now-grinning Padfoot behind the ears. "It was all just a misunderstanding."

"A dog who understands English. Great." Janet pinched the bridge of her nose while her husband came over and put an arm around her shoulders. "I suppose he's magical, too."

Harry didn't let that one get by. Remus grinned. Harry might not have been his most disciplined student, but no one could accuse him of being slow on his feet. "That's right."

Janet sighed. "It appears I owe you an apology, dog, but in the future, I'd appreciate it if you were more careful. Harry's been sick for the last few days, and just got back on his feet."

In a move Remus thought a trifle overdone, Sirius draped a forepaw over his muzzle and whined in response.

"Lovely, now that you have that settled, Remus and the dog can leave on a positive note," Tom observed. When Harry started to object, he held up a hand. "I can't have him in the dining area, lad."

"What about one of the parlors? Please, Tom, I'll make sure the room has a good cleaning after. You'll never know he was there."

Tom rubbed a hand over his bald pate, clearly at odds with the whole situation. "All right, lad, but I'm holding you responsible for any accidents."

Harry nodded. "Agreed." Turning to Professor Dumbledore he asked, "Shall we go in, then?"

"After you. Oh, I should tell you, Mr. Ronald Weasley, Miss Granger, and their families are waiting inside. I had planned to let you get your bearings first, but you see what happened."

"That's all right, sir. I'd rather not tell the story more than once..." Harry trailed off looking uncertainly at Kitty and Becky.

"I think I know most of this part. I'll stay with the girls," Janet offered, earning a grateful smile from Harry. "We can talk to Professor Penstone until Professor Dumbledore is ready for us."

"An excellent idea, madam. I will be happy to remain with you to answer any questions you have about Hogwarts or its curriculum," Snape offered smoothly.

Oh, great, Remus thought, unsure whether or not this was a good idea. Harry evidently shared his sentiments. "Professor Dumbledore..." he began, but it was Professor McGonagall who came to his rescue.

"An excellent idea, Severus. Between Professor Penstone and the Hogwarts Heads of House, I'm sure we'll be able to answer all of the Wrights' questions."

Dumbledore nodded his approval. "Very good, Professor McGonagall."

Remus was about to escort Harry into the parlor, but the Muggle father approached. Being a werewolf had its definite downsides, but there were times when his enhanced senses could be very useful. Curious as to what the Muggle had on his mind, Remus shamelessly listened in.

"Are you okay on your own? Tom or I can go in with you if you like, but one of us needs to stay with Janet. I'm not sure about that one sour-looking character from Hogwarts. He reminds me of a snake-oil salesman."

Remus was hard pressed to control his own features when Harry snorted at this last observation.

The father noticed, too. "Of course if you prefer, Tom and I could talk to the Professors and Janet could come in with you. No one will give you grief more than once when they see that diaper bag turned morningstar of hers." He paused artfully. "All she needs is a few spikes and a chain."

That got a smile and a laugh. Remus grinned as well. Maybe this guy wouldn't be so bad to have around. No matter who got the actual guardianship, he doubted Harry would want to sever ties with this family.

Sirius had evidently come to the same conclusion. Remus grinned. Sirius might be unable to speak in his Padfoot form, but that didn't

mean he couldn't make himself understood. He barked at Harry, then he butted his head up against the father's leg, pushing him forward a bit.

Harry knelt down to the dog's level. "Really? You don't mind?" he asked, sputtering when Sirius licked his face again.

"I take it that's a yes," Steve observed, turning to signal his wife and Tom.

Remus thought Harry looked a little more confident, as he climbed back to his feet. "All right, then, let's get this over with," he said to no one in particular, and heading toward one of the Leaky Cauldron's parlors.

He never made it.

As soon as the Weasleys and the Grangers saw him heading in their general direction they came thundering out the door to greet him.

Surprisingly, given how badly the kids wanted to catch up with Harry, Molly Weasley was leading the pack, face like a thundercloud and scolding finger at the ready. "Harry James Potter! Where have you been?" she demanded, faltering when she got close enough to look at him properly, and hesitating even more when Harry took an unconscious step back, bumping into Steve. "Is that you, Harry dear?"

Remus noted Harry was looking rather like an owl in daylight, but he recovered nicely once Molly was no longer coming at him like a freight train. "It's me, Mrs. Weasley," he verified, then stopped and bit his lower lip. An awkward silence fell until Steve nudged him. "Throw her a bone, kid. Say you're glad to see her or something," he prompted in a voice only Harry and Remus could hear.

Harry nodded slightly, then did as he was told. "It's good to see you, all of you," he offered, directing the first part at Molly and the second at the group at large. Seeking out Arthur and Molly Weasley he added, "I'm sorry about the Burrow."

Steve barely had time to get out of the way before Harry was enveloped in a tearful hug. "Oh you naughty boy! We've been so worried! Never you mind about the Burrow. What were you thinking? You could have been captured! You could have died!" Molly scolded as the others gathered around.

"Hmm, yeah, I see now what he was worried about," Steve said with a grin, moving to stand alongside Remus, and indicating the excited group. The boys had pried Harry loose from their mother's grasp and were taking turns ruffling his hair and pounding him on the back.

Remus laughed in spite of himself as Ginny elbowed Ron out of the way so she and Hermione could give Harry hugs. "They're good people. A little exciteable perhaps, but good people." He paused, mulling over what Steve had said a second, then asked, "Harry was worried?"

"Yeah." When Remus and Padfoot both looked at him, Steve shrugged. "Let's just say he was expecting a much colder reception. Janet, Poppy and I tried to reassure him, but he wouldn't believe us," he said, breaking off with a grin as Harry, Ron and Hermione came over to them.

"Professor Dumbledore wants to wait until Janet can join us," Harry told Steve, "so, you can go listen to the Professors if you want."

Steve nodded. "Thanks, bud, don't mind if I do." He started toward Tom and Janet's table, then stopped and looked back at Harry. "And by the way, you owe me five bucks."

"So you say Potter's Muggle family and his folder are gone?"

Percy Weasley nodded. "Yes, Minister. The uncle accepted an overseas position with his company, and they appear to have left Potter behind."

"Behind? You mean alone?"

"I..." Percy stopped and spread his hands helplessly, wishing he hadn't been so short with his father a few days ago. There was definitely more to this story than he knew, but he was sure his

parents had enough to be getting on with after vandals had damaged the Burrow a few nights ago.

"I'm not sure, sir," he finally admitted, feeling horrible since he hadn't even bothered to send an owl. Stop that. You can do it later, Percy counseled himself, forcibly dragging his mind back on track. "Arabella Figg knew Potter's relatives were gone, though. She said the uncle only had a short time to prepare for his move. Someone must have known, though. She thought I had come out to gather specifications so the warding in Surrey could be dismantled."

"Yes, yes, that will have to be done..." Cornelius Fudge muttered distractedly. "Be a good chap and drop by the Auror's Warding Office, will you?"

"Of course, Minister."

"This is a most irregular transfer of guardianship. I'm concerned the proper procedures weren't followed. At the very least the proper forms have to be filed unless..."

"Unless what, Minister?" Percy asked, when the silence began to stretch out.

"Unless Potter's relatives were having difficulty finding a suitable place for him. The boy can be a handful at times."

"As you say, Minister. I know Potter has seemed discontent living in the Muggle World," Percy said, as the conversation he had with his father crossed his mind for perhaps the millionth time. "Perhaps he would be happier in the Wizarding World. My mum and dad have offered to take him in."

"Arthur Weasley? Shelter another child? Don't be daft, man! Besides, aren't you always carrying on that he has more people in his house than he can manage?"

Percy opened his mouth, then closed it again. What could he say? The minister was right.

"However, I do think you may be onto something," Fudge continued, missing or ignoring Percy's aborted reply. "It's high time Harry Potter learned about the Wizarding World and his place in it. Perhaps hiding him in the Muggle World was a mistake. Perhaps I should look into placing him in a magical family this time. Excuse me, will you Mr. Weasley? I want to make a few Floo calls.

Chapter 35: Meeting at the Leaky Cauldron Part 2

July 28, 1995

Stephen Wright stifled a sigh and discreetly glanced at his watch. In his unbiased opinion, this meeting ranked pretty high on the unproductive meter. Talking to the professors about possible school options for Kitty hadn't been bad, but this! With the exception of Dr. Granger, who seemed as confused at her participation as he and Janet were theirs, everyone else seemed to be keeping the real subject matter secret. It was almost as if they were being kept around in case they were needed, but needed for what he wasn't sure. Maybe they'll be more forthcoming after Mr. Weasley gets back, he thought hopefully. Professor Dumbledore had sent the red-haired wizard to check on something in the Census Library and Archive not long after the kids had been shooed out.

From what he'd been able to piece together the issue at hand was Harry, or more accurately, a.) where Harry was going to live now that his aunt and uncle had left England, and b.) how to keep him safe from this dark wizard everyone seemed so afraid of. Perhaps that was it. Harry seemed fit enough. It probably wouldn't be hard to train him up and teach him some basic self defense techniques, provided the boy was willing.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Janet shift in her chair and glance toward the door. No doubt about it, she was doing a slow burn. And with some reason, Steve thought, reaching down and giving her hand a squeeze under the table. Becky had gotten fussy during their talk with the teachers, and now she was showing signs of a low-grade fever. Madam Pomfrey had warned them against overexertion, saying she needed at least one more dose of Children's Pepper Up. If Harry hadn't volunteered to watch her, either he or Janet would have had to have taken her home.

Steve glanced at the door himself, wondering if Harry had gotten Becky down for a nap. He had little doubt he would, especially if he sang to her a little. Harry had a soothing quality to his voice that Steve frankly envied. Unfortunately, if Harry was successful he was going to have to hold Becky for the duration. Looks like the portable

playpen would have been handy after all, he thought, sneaking another look at his wife and recalling how she had suddenly decided they needed the playpen when they were about five yards down the street. She would have turned around and gotten it, too, if he and Harry hadn't talked her out of it.

They'd kept the conversation firmly on Kitty and her abilities earlier, but the subject of accidental magic kept running through his mind. "Sometimes a child learns to repeat an early experience and develops a level of control." Professor Flitwick's words explained Kitty almost to a tee, but Steve couldn't help feeling that the more normal definition of accidental magic--especially how it occurred most often when the caster was stressed--fit Janet like a glove. Calm, she was kind of hit or miss in her "guesses" but stressed she was usually right. Curious, Steve filed that bit of information away, planning to make an appointment later.

Personally, he didn't see what the issue was with Harry's guardianship. Steve was as sympathetic as the next guy, but there was also a lot of truth in the adage "if it ain't broke don't fix it." The boy seemed happy enough here at the Leaky Cauldron, and from what he could see Tom had been doing a decent job looking after him. Maybe there was more going on here than there seemed to be.

"There's no change. They still can't find it!"

Well, this can't be good, Steve thought, turning with the others in the direction of the door. Arthur Weasley was standing just inside, pulling the door shut behind him.

"Oh, wait, check that, there has been a little change. The Minister knows it's missing now and the place is in an absolute panic trying to locate it."

"Interesting," was Professor Dumbledore's comment. "Please do sit down, Arthur."

Mr. Weasley sat, but clearly wasn't finished reporting. "That's not all, Albus, word in the halls is you're the one who took it."

"Is it indeed?" Dumbledore's eyes twinkled behind his half moon glasses. "Well, they're certainly welcome to look for it."

Mr. Weasley was less than amused. "This is serious, Albus. I was actually glad Percy's conscience started bothering him, but I never thought he'd go to Surrey and check on Harry!"

Steve didn't see what the problem was with this, nor, it appeared, did Tom, Janet or Dr. Granger, but the other witches and wizards around the table evidently did. Every one of them, even Harry's dog, sat up straighter and leaned towards the table as though Mr. Weasley now had their undivided attention.

And none of them looked happy.

Professor Snape looked especially displeased as he turned to Professor Dumbledore. "I told you we should have Obliviated that little fool."

"Percy is one of the Weasleys' sons," Tom said quietly from his place between the Wrights and Dr. Granger. "Oblivate is a spell that erases memories."

Steve nodded his understanding. Makes sense, he thought. It certainly explained the glare on Mrs. Weasley's face. He wouldn't have been surprised if the good professor suddenly crumpled where he sat. An argument seemed imminent, but Professor Dumbledore raised his hands, commanding them both to silence. "It's done, Severus. There's no time to quarrel amongst ourselves. Arthur, could you tell how much the Minister knows?"

Mr. Weasley frowned as he considered this. "Once Percy told me what he'd been up to I checked with Arabella Figg. He followed procedure and went to her house before approaching the Dursley home. She told him Harry's uncle accepted a new position overseas, but didn't go into detail. She thought he knew already. The good news is Percy, and by extension the minister, thinks Harry's guardian transfer was simply mismanaged. That puts the Ministry in a bad light, so they'll probably try to keep the story out of the Daily Prophet."

"That's the main Wizard newspaper," Tom said. Steve nodded again, grateful now that the old innkeeper had chosen a seat in the midst of the Muggles. Everyone else looked tense and worried and were probably in no mood to answer questions.

"That's something, I suppose." Dumbledore pulled off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is he still planning to assign Harry a guardian himself?"

Mr. Weasley nodded. I believe so. Technically, the minister should contact Harry's relatives and verify their wishes, but Percy mentioned the Curator Tribuo statute and the Curator Absentis clause. That gives him some legal grounds to choose a guardian for Harry himself, and I think we all know who he's likely to ask." Mr. Weasley shared a grim look with the Hogwarts Professors and Mr. Lupin that made Steve sit up and pay a little closer attention. Obviously none of them were pleased by the prospect of this person--whoever he was--getting custody of Harry.

Janet touched Tom's arm. "Minister Fudge? Is that the person Harry told us about? The one who doesn't believe Voldemort's back?"

Tom grimaced. "The very same. But please, say, 'You Know Who' when referring to the Dark Lord. It's a bad omen to say his name aloud."

Dumbledore evidently heard this last bit, because he looked over at the resident Muggles. "Dr. Granger, Mr. and Mrs. Wright, I do appreciate you bearing with us."

Dr. Granger nodded graciously. "Not at all, Professor."

Janet wasn't in the mood to be so kind. Steve grinned behind his hand as she raised an eyebrow, and crossed her arms on her chest. "My youngest is still not well, Professor, so if you don't mind I'd like to know what's going on and why you still need us here. I'm very sorry Harry's been displaced--heck, I'd consider taking him in myself if I could--but you haven't mentioned one thing we can influence or have any control over."

Tom nodded from his seat between Janet and Dr. Granger. "The same goes for me, Professor. The boy's been a pleasure to have around the old place this summer--very conscientious and hard working--but I'm not a relative. I have no claim on him."

Dumbledore looked over at Tom and Janet, an expression on his face Steve couldn't quite decipher. "How would you feel if I said you might?"

Tom and Janet looked at each other, then back at the headmaster. "What?"

"How would you feel if I said you might have a claim?" Dumbledore paused and looked between Tom, Steve, Janet, and Dr. Granger. "Any of you. That is why you are here. Knowing the possible risks, would you still be willing to take the boy in?"

"I..."

Steve shrugged when Janet faltered and looked up at him. "That's a hell of a question to answer on short notice, Professor. We'd need a little time to talk it over, and we'd also have to see what Harry thinks."

Janet nodded. "Yeah, Tom and I learned the hard way how much Harry hates being kept out of the loop." She paused to exchange a smile with the toothless wizard beside her then turned back to Dumbledore. "Why do you think we'd be considered as guardians, Professor? Steve and I can't protect Harry magically, and besides, we've only known him for a few weeks!"

Dumbledore studied the parlor ceiling for a moment, absently stroking his beard. "After Mr. Potter's parents were killed, a fair amount of protective magic was put in place to try to ensure his safety. One of these mechanisms was a failsafe placed on his Census and Archive folder. The folder was supposed to alarm if Harry was in danger, but the failsafe only activated if something happened to his aunt and uncle. As near as we can calculate, this failsafe was triggered on the first of July when Mr. Potter's last blood relatives essentially severed ties with him. Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall have been researching the matter since we became aware of it, and they

believe it is responsible for the magical invisibility Mr. Potter currently has."

"Harry's inability to receive owls, you mean?" Janet asked.

Professor McGonagall nodded. "We also think it's responsible for your inability to receive owls. Tom mentioned you were receiving threatening letters than suddenly stopped, and neither Professor Penstone or myself could successfully address an acceptance letter to your daughter Katrina."

Steve considered this, rubbing absently on his short beard. "Is that why Harry's been able to hide from you all summer? The folder's protection?"

Professor McGonagall shifted in her seat, looking rather uncomfortable. "Not entirely. We believe the protection developed in stages. If we understand the theory correctly, the Ministry had ample time to correct the matter, had anyone noticed anything amiss. No one did, so the folder assumed the Ministry had fallen and help from that quarter was not available. That's when it made Mr. Potter untrackable, and, we assume, began gathering information on the people around him. It's possible, highly likely in fact, that a guardian has been chosen."

"The whole situation is an unfortunate example of complacency," Professor Flitwick added. "In hindsight, the characteristics of the failsafe should have been modified from time to time to reflect Mr. Potter's age and circumstances, but they never were. I had all but forgotten the spells existed. To the point, Mr. Potter was only fifteen months old when this tragedy occurred, and quite unable look after himself. A guardian was essential to his survival."

"The folder still thinks Harry's a toddler?" Janet paused and traded an amused look with Steve. "That'll go over well."

Professor McGonagall's lips twitched, but she stopped herself before she smiled. "Quite."

Steve felt Janet's hand slip into his own and gave it a tight squeeze as Professor Dumbledore took up the tale again.

"The person or persons chosen would be someone Mr. Potter has spent time with this summer and is comfortable with. Based on that alone, Mrs. Wright, you and Tom are the most likely candidates. However, Mr. Potter did call upon Dr. Granger once, and he is quite fond of the Weasleys, so we are currently unsure who, if anyone, the folder chose. I'd hoped the folder would be available for examination, which is why I didn't bother explaining things earlier. Unfortunately it has gone missing--possibly in reaction to Minister Fudge's plans to nominate a guardian."

Janet nodded faintly on Steve's right. "Makes sense, but if we're talking about guardians now, Harry should definitely be here. I'll go get him and the girls."

"I believe that's a little premature, Mrs. Wright. No arrangements have been made."

"Premature? Arrangements?" Janet paused in the act of rising from her chair and raised an eyebrow at Professor Snape. "Don't you think Harry should have some say in these 'arrangements,' Professor? This is his life we're discussing, after all."

"Yes, but if a guardian has been selected, the continuation of the folder's magical protection may be dependent on our acceptance of its decision," Professor Dumbledore explained. "That is the crux of the matter, if we are correct."

Steve mulled that over then frowned. "Are you saying this is a done deal, then? That Harry and whoever the folder selected have no choice?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. The folder is not the Ministry of Magic. It does not have any real authority. The charms placed upon it could be overridden or removed if the parties find the situation unlivable, indeed, persuading the Ministry to accept the folder's decision may be a challenge."

Janet turned and looked at the headmaster for a long minute, a quizzical little frown on her face. "You really believe this protection is the best for Harry--and for us--don't you?" she said, making it more of a statement than a question.

Dumbledore looked startled for just an instant, then an almost grandfatherly smile graced his features. "I do indeed, my dear. Accidental though its creation may have been, the protection is strong. Accidental or not, the magic is strong. I have lived over a century and have never seen its equal. If it is destroyed it would be difficult if not impossible to re-create."

"So all the answers are in a folder no one can find. Great." Steve shook his head. "What do we do now?"

"An excellent question, Mr. Wright. I'm afraid I don't know."

Fred Weasley picked up a biscuit and took a huge bite out of it. So far, he thought, it's been a really nutty day. Hell, what am I saying? Things have been nutty since the Quidditch World Cup!

Still, he had to admit, things had gotten exceptionally weird the last month or so. You Know Who's return, Cedric's death, Harry gifting George and himself with his Tournament winnings, learning Harry's Muggle relatives had run off, Harry hiding from them, the attack on the Burrow, and now this meeting at the Leaky Cauldron.

Glancing up, he discreetly studied his Quidditch team mate. Harry had changed a great deal over the last few weeks. Some of the changes were purely physical like his new height and weight, his haircut, and those compact things he was wearing.

Others were more than skin deep. Behaviors Fred couldn't recall Harry ever exhibiting before. He was acting almost afraid of them for Heaven's sake!

Equally surprising though far less troubling was the way Harry was calmly soothing ickle Becky to sleep. Glancing between Ron and Harry, Fred covered a smile with his hand. Harry was holding the little

girl on his shoulder and singing softly to her like it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

Fred traded an amused glance with George. There was no mistaking the respect in Ginny and Hermione's eyes, but he was completely blowing Ron's mind.

Still, fun as teasing Ron was, even indirectly, he reckoned the kid would get heavy after a while, especially after she was fully asleep. "Hey mate," he said, being careful to keep his voice down. "Want me to transfigure a cot for her? I'm seventeen now, you know," he said, smirking when Ron, Hermione, and Ginny all turned in his direction, then traded a long-suffering look.

"Don't remind us," Ron said. Fred thought he looked grateful for a more familiar topic as he turned to address Harry. "The two of them got their Apparation licenses," he said, jerking a thumb in Fred and George's direction. "They've been Apparating downstairs every morning just because they can!"

Harry lost some of the edginess he'd been showing and actually smiled. "Really? That's brilliant!"

"Let's see if you still think so after a few days," Hermione said, while Ginny rolled her eyes. "Between the noise it makes, and never knowing when one of them is going to appear out of nowhere--even Mr. Weasley's gotten cross."

Mention of Arthur Weasley blew away all traces of Harry's good humor. Sighing inwardly, Fred watched the unwelcome guardedness steal back over his friend's features. Time for a change of subject. Unless he was sadly mistaken, ickle Becky was finally asleep.

"Here mate," he said, transfiguring a little cot. "Lay her down. I reckon you'll both be more comfortable."

Harry looked at the cot--a bang up job if Fred did say so himself--but seemed reluctant. "It's just a normal bed, right? It won't, you know, do anything, will it?"

Fred felt his eyebrows come together again, and saw a similar expression cross George's face. The two of them exchanged an entire conversation with a glance, then made a big show out of being mortally offended.

Fred started. "Why Harry!" he scolded, while George moved to Harry's other side, "I'm shocked!"

"Insulted!" George agreed.

"Appalled!"

"Cut to the quick!"

"I mean, really! What kind of chaps do you think we are?" Fred demanded, sneaking a peek to see if their theatrics were working.

They were. Harry was starting to look decidedly shamefaced. "Sorry guys."

"Hmm, don't be too sorry, your instincts are good," Hermione said, with a smile, before either Fred or George could graciously accept the apology.

"True, but I think they draw the line at pranking toddlers," Ginny said. Fred didn't miss the "you better not have done anything" look she threw in his and George's direction as she knelt by the little cot and pushed on it with both hands. When nothing happened she smiled up at Harry. "See?"

"Yeah, okay," Harry agreed, laying Becky on the cot. Once he got her settled, they sat in silence for a minute or two, then Hermione spoke up.

"You sing very well, Harry. Why didn't you ever tell us?"

Harry, Fred thought, looked a trifle embarrassed, but shrugged and answered the question. "It isn't important."

"But it is!" Ginny disagreed, after exchanging a disbelieving look with Hermione.

Harry shook his head. "Nah." When they would have argued further, he silenced them with a warning glance in Becky's direction. "Look, everyone thinks I'm supposed to deal with Volde--err--You Know Who, right? So even if you're right, what good is it? You think I could walk up and say, 'Oi, Voldie! Since music soothes the savage beast, how about I sing you a tune? Or better yet...' Fred watched along with the others as Harry paused and executed what might have been a pirouette, then bowed, sweeping an imaginary top hat off his head. "...may I have this dance?" he finished, making Hermione giggle and the Weasleys snort into their pumpkin juice. Even Kitty, who had been looking rather solemn since talking to the professors, unbent enough to smile. That, it appeared, was what Harry was aiming for.

"Hah! Gotcha!" Harry said with a grin, reclaiming his seat beside the brown-haired girl. "Aw, c'mon, what's wrong?" he asked, when her smile faded as quickly as it had appeared.

Kitty glanced around looking uncomfortable, then shrugged. "It's Mom. She's scared and confused, and doesn't really like any of her choices."

That was news to Fred. Mrs. Wright looked rather tired, but seemed calm enough when she and her husband had followed Professor Dumbledore into the parlor.

Hermione seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "She told you that?"

Kitty glanced at Hermione, then looked at the floor. "No. She didn't have to."

Fred thought that was a rather cryptic statement to make, but it clearly meant something to Harry. While everyone else was trying to make sense of the whole conversation, Harry had a look of dawning comprehension.

"That thing...that thing your Mum does...you can do it too, can't you?"

Kitty shrugged. "Sometimes. Especially when it's loud. It came up when the teachers asked us questions."

"How did that go?" Harry asked.

"It was okay. Professor McGonagall and Professor Penstone talked about Hogwarts and the Salem Witches Institute."

That, of course, caught Hermione's attention. "What did they say?" she asked, ignoring the various sighs and eye-rolls around her.

Kitty shrugged again. "Some international board sets standards for the schools to follow, so the required classes are the same everywhere. Since I don't have a problem with accidental magic, I can stay in the Muggle school system and learn the magical basics from a tutor or go to magical school full time like you. Professor McGonagall is going to recommend some tutors for Mom but they aren't sure what to do with me yet. Kids usually go to one of the big magical schools 'cause they have more staff and offer more choices than a single tutor can."

"Well you have to go to Hogwarts," Harry said, clearly dismissing the other choices as mental. "Did you show them your ball?"

That got a smile and a nod. "You were right. Professor Flitwick really liked it."

Okay, that was too good to let go. "Your 'ball'?" Fred wondered aloud.

Kitty seemed hesitant, but Harry squeezed her hand. "It's all right. C'mon. These are my friends. I'd like for them to be your friends, too."

"Okay. Hold out your hand," Kitty said, addressing Fred. He did as she asked and the next thing he knew, she had somehow produced a glowing white ball and deposited it neatly on his palm.

"Wicked!" George said, sounding awed as he and the others crowded around for a closer look. He gave Kitty a big grin and said, "I think this

is the beginning of a long and beautiful friendship. How long do they last?"

Kitty frowned as she considered the question, then shrugged again. "I don't know. I always just made them go away."

"Hmm, definitely an area for experimentation," Fred mused, squeezing the ball between his thumb and forefinger. "We might be able to make an entire line of Wheezes out of these!"

"They like to invent joke products," Harry explained, when Kitty looked up at him. "They want to open a store and sell them." Fred's estimation of the kid went up a few notches when she smiled and clapped her hands. Obviously she recognized a good thing when she heard it.

"Cool! Wait'll I tell Dad!" Kitty said, before hesitating and tugging on Harry's hand. "How much longer will they be?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know," he admitted. Fred thought he looked slightly annoyed, but really couldn't blame him. The adults had been sequestered away for quite a little while now. His dad had emerged briefly to run an errand of some sort, but when he'd returned, he'd headed directly back to the parlor, not stopping to update them or answer any questions.

"What do you think they're doing in there?" George asked, seeming to divine Fred's thoughts.

"No idea," Fred replied. He paused a beat, then grinned. "Want to find out?"

Ron sighed, then addressed his brothers with some asperity. "What are you two on about? If you go in there, you'll just get tossed out."

Fred looked at Ron in the pitying way he knew the younger boy hated. "Aw, bless him," he said, addressing George.

"Pity," George agreed, patting Ron on the head. "Clearly he doesn't realize 'find out' means 'eavesdrop.'"

"Oh, really?" Hermione's tone spoke volumes. "And how might you accomplish that? Harry said Tom keeps muffling charms on the doors."

Fred lifted his head and grinned. "With a new product in our Weasley Wizard Wheezes line."

"They're actually quite brilliant," Ginny said, unexpectedly coming to the twins' defense when Hermione appeared ready to dismiss them out of hand.

"And how do you know of it?" Ron asked, rounding on his sister. Fred shook his head. The boy was never going to win friends and influence people with that attitude.

Ginny could take care of herself, though. "I asked," she replied pointedly. "You should try it sometime."

Fred rolled his eyes at his younger siblings' antics, but Ginny's endorsement seemed to have piqued Hermione's curiosity. He could almost hear her weighing the possible outcomes as she tried to decide whether to take the bait.

George waggled his eyebrows at her. "Come on, you know you want to," he teased outrageously. Hermione looked like she couldn't decide whether to be offended or not, then relented and smiled.

"All right, what's this latest invention then?" she asked in her best "this better be good" voice.

Fred traded a look with George, then both of them flashed their most charming smiles.

"Why it's only the most amazing--"

"Colossal--"

"Truly magnificent--"

"Piece of work--"

"Ever to grace the face of the planet!"

Fred paused dramatically, then dug into his pocket. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Extendible Ear!"

Hermione raised a brow. "The what?"

Ron scowled. "They're barking, Hermione. You should know that by now."

Well aware of Ron's temperament, Fred gave him the pitying look again. "Stress," he pronounced, raising sympathetic eyes to George.

George nodded and hummed in agreement. "Sad, really."

"Perhaps he should invest in a Canary Creme."

Ron was less than amused. "Perhaps you two should just sod off," he said in a way that made Fred swear he was channeling Percy.

"So how does it work?" Hermione asked, before a row could get started. Fred traded an exasperated look with George. Hermione was a nice girl and a fellow Gryffindor, but she just didn't seem to understand the Weasley's favorite form of stress management.

On the other hand, how many opportunities did he get to discuss Wheezes with a willing and informed audience?

"It's very simple." Draping an arm over her shoulders, he flipped one end of the Ear towards the door. "You get that end near what you want to listen to, and put this end in your ear," he said, demonstrating. "Who wants to give it a go?"

Not surprisingly, Harry was first in line. He tossed the listening end toward the parlor door, then frowned. "I can't make out the words."

Fred made a little noise of agreement. "Tom casts a good charm."

"The best!" Harry agreed, before shrugging and offering the Ear back to Fred. "Oh, well."

Fred motioned for Harry to put the Ear back on. "If it isn't a full Silencing Spell, we aren't sunk. We just have to get closer."

"We'll have to work on controlling the sensitivity of these things," George said, twirling one of the Ears in a circle as he walked.

Fred nodded his agreement as they edged closer, testing the sound every few steps. Unfortunately for them, they couldn't clearly make out anything unless the listening end of the Ears were pressed against the parlor door.

When they were finally able to make out the conversation Fred winced and sneaked a glance at Harry. The voices inside were not happy ones.

"Mr. Wright, I don't believe you appreciate the gravity of the situation."

Ouch, Fred thought with a wince. Mum was speaking in her coldest most civil voice. Never a good sign.

"Oh, I understand perfectly. And you're right. Harry needs protection. All I'm saying is he needs to take at least partial ownership of that protection."

"Ownership? Rubbish! He's just a child!"

"Agreed. Potter isn't ready for that sort of responsibility."

Fred felt Harry stiffen and who could blame him, really? Professor Snape's voice was enough to set his teeth on edge. Fortunately the Calvary wasn't long in coming.

"How can you say that? Harry's done a wonderful job of looking after himself this summer!"

"That's a matter of opinion, Mrs. Wright. He's managed to keep himself alive, true, but he also withheld important information and disobeyed a direct summons from his headmaster."

"We've been over this, Snape. Harry says he didn't want to put anyone in danger, and I believe him, but the real crux of the problem seems to be his determination to stay away from his Muggle relatives. Based on previous experience, Harry thought he'd be returned to them if he came to us. If you look at it from that point of view, all Harry's perceived naughtiness was just a form of self protection."

"Don't be daft, Lupin."

"No, Professor Snape, I think Remus may have the right of it. The boy's really blossomed over the last few weeks. He seems much happier and more at ease than he was when he arrived."

"Thank you, Tom. Look, I know it sounds odd. Harry may not even realize it himself but it's true. Call it an accident, call it sheer dumb luck, but he found a place where he was valued and accepted. He's had a chance to heal and shore up his sense self worth. A chance, I daresay, he wouldn't have gotten at his aunt and uncle's house."

"You're making too much of it, Lupin. Besides, in my experience, self worth has never been a problem in the Potter family."

"All right, that's enough."

Fred and the others looked at each other when Janet Wright made her pronouncement, and a second later they heard chair legs scrape across the floor.

"I don't know who you think you are, or what your quarrel is with Harry, but if you believe even half of what you've said today, it's obvious you don't know him at all!"

"Mrs. Wright--"

"No, Headmaster, I'm not through. I think I know what part of the problem is. Most of you are accustomed to thinking of Harry as a baby, and that's just not true anymore."

"Jannie's right. I'll agree he's not grown yet, but he's way past the point in life where he needs his nose wiped for him. Besides, it's better to work with a person's temperament and for better or worse, Harry's a protector. He likes to act, not sit on the sidelines."

"Yes, and he's also old enough to have a say in what happens next. It's ridiculous of us to be sitting in here planning out his future without asking his input."

"I concur."

Fred felt himself nodding along with the Wrights and Professor Lupin, not realizing until a few seconds had passed that quick footsteps were headed toward the door. "Scatter!" he hissed, waving the others back as Mrs. Wright reached the door and yanked it open. That's it. We're caught, he thought, already imagining the fit his mother was going to throw. All she had to do was open the door a little wider and the lot of them would be visible to the parlor's occupants.

Mrs. Wright surprised him, though. Instead of sounding the alarm, she took everything in with a glance and finished her exit, barely hesitating as she did so. "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" she said, crossing her arms and raising a dark eyebrow at Harry. "Where's Becky?"

Fred reckoned the First Task she-dragons looked friendlier, but Harry didn't seem fussed. "She's sleeping, just over there," he replied, pointing. "I was afraid I'd wake her if I tried to move the cot."

Mrs. Wright looked in the indicated direction, then nodded and became all business again. "So how much did you hear?"

Fred blinked, thrown a little by the sudden change of topic. Harry seemed to be having the same difficulty. Unfortunately he tried to stall for time by using one of the hardest defenses to pull off--playing dumb. "Hear?"

Fred winced and resisted the urge to shake his head. Oh, Harry, Harry! We have to work on your delivery! Harry was able to keep a straight face, true, but speaking almost an octave above his normal tone was a dead giveaway.

Mrs. Wright, as expected, wasn't buying it. "Don't mess with me, Harry, I'm not in the mood. We've already frittered away the better part of an hour and at this rate Tom's going to have to reopen for dinner before we're done. There's no sense repeating what you already know, so I say again, how much did you hear?"

"Not a lot," Harry admitted, shuffling his feet. "Just since Mrs. Weasley told Steve he didn't understand the situation."

"Hmm. You held out longer than I thought you might," Mrs. Wright said, with a hint of a smile. "Becky?"

Harry looked sheepish, then nodded. "I just got her down a few minutes ago."

"I suspected as much." Mrs. Wright walked over to the cot and touched Becky's arm. "She seems a little cool now. Let's get her blanket."

"Oh, right. Sorry, I should have thought of that." Harry rummaged briefly in the bag, producing a small crocheted baby blanket and passing it to Mrs. Wright. "Here it is...hey! What's this?"

"What's what?" Mrs. Wright asked, unfolding the blanket and tucking it around Becky.

Curious, Fred turned to see what he was on about. Harry was still peering into the bag.

"Blimey, Janet, did the professors stretch the bag? I'd have sworn this thing was stuffed to capacity before we left and I know it wasn't there before."

“The professors gave me a handful of pamphlets, Harry. They’re here in my purse. I haven’t put anything in the diaper bag since we left the house.”

“Strange...hang on...this has my name on it!” Harry exclaimed, drawing a fat folder out of the diaper bag. Fred was just about to ask what the heck a Census and Archive folder was doing in there, but was interrupted by Mrs. Wright’s sharp intake of breath.

“Wait, Harry!” she snapped, making Harry jump and pause in the act of opening the folder. “The professors want to talk to you first. There’s a few things you need to know.”

“What? Why? What’s going on?” Harry asked, turning the folder over in his hands. “Wait...is this the folder that--” He broke off in surprise when Dumbledore came up behind him and plucked the folder out of his hand.

“Mr. Malfoy mentioned. Why yes, it’s the very same, Harry,” the headmaster verified. “I thought we’d take a short break,” he continued, as the rest of the parlor’s occupants exited. “We shall call the meeting back to order when everyone has had a chance to stretch and Tom fetches some more of his excellent tea and biscuits.” As if to prove his point, Dr. Granger exited, followed by Professors Snape, Sprout, and Penstone. Tom brought up the rear, empty biscuit plate in hand and an empty teapot and several used teacups floating in his wake. He headed for Fred and the other kids while the Professors and Dr. Granger walked toward Mrs. Wright.

“More juice and biscuits, kids?” Tom asked, levitating their near-empty juice flask and biscuit plate with a wave of his wand and adding them to the floating parade of dishes. Silly question, Fred thought. Especially when Ron’s about. Confident that his baby brother would agree to a refill without any prompting, Fred aimed his Extendable Ear at the knot of adults off to his left.

"Professor Dumbledore's called a short break. We're not needed for the second part so we're heading back to Hogwarts," Professor

Penstone said to Mrs. Wright. "Please feel free to owl any of us if you have any additional questions."

Mrs. Wright nodded and shook the proffered hand. "Thank you, Professor. I will." With that she bent down and grasped the cot, testing the weight, Fred reckoned. He was just about to lend a hand but Dr. Granger stopped her.

"I thought I'd come out and keep the children company while the others finish up. I'd be happy to watch your little ones as well, since Harry will be busy."

Mrs. Wright hesitated, clearly torn, but Dr. Granger just smiled. "It's all a bit overwhelming, isn't it dear?" she asked, a knowing sympathy in her eyes that Fred didn't really follow.

"Yes," Mrs. Wright agreed with a sigh. She seemed to make up her mind about her kids at least, because she gave Dr. Granger a little smile and pushed the cot closer to the wall instead. "Thank you. We'll try not to be long."

Dr. Granger laughed. "It's nothing, dear. Ring me up once everything's sorted here," she said, pressing a small card in Mrs. Wright's hand.

"Here we are," Tom announced to no one in particular, setting fresh juice and biscuits on the table Fred and the others had been sitting around while a pot of tea, and a second plate of biscuits bobbed along in his wake. "Shall we go back in Janet?"

Fred thought Mrs. Wright looked like she'd fancy a lie down at the moment, but she took a deep breath and nodded. "Sure. Let's see if we can get this settled," she said, motioning for Tom to precede her through the parlor door.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Dumbledore began once everyone was settled again. "In a recent letter you mentioned a folder to me. You recall the letter, I trust?"

Harry frowned, thinking that went without saying, but he nodded and said, "Yes sir."

"Very good. For expediency's sake, please just hear me out and I shall endeavor to answer any questions you have. Are you familiar with an office in the Ministry of Magic called the Census Library and Archive?"

"No, sir."

"Every magical citizen has a folder assigned to them. The folders house all matters of public record. As you can see, yours contains copies of all the news articles that have been written about you over the years. It also contains more mundane items like your school records and contact information. The Census Library and Archive is where those folders are created, stored and managed," Dumbledore explained in his matter-of-fact way. Harry felt his irritation slip a jot as the old wizard's tale unfolded. One thing he'd always liked about Dumbledore was his ability to answer questions without making the asker feel stupid.

"The night your parents died, several precautions were taken to ensure your safety. One of them was spelling your folder to watch over you, and alarm if you were ever in any physical danger. That part obviously failed, yes," he said, holding up a hand when Harry frowned and started to speak. "For that you have my most heartfelt apologies, cold comfort though they may be. We can discuss that presently, but what concerns us now is a contingency mechanism that was designed to activate if anything ever happened to your guardians. You mentioned having trouble getting owls lately. That's because currently you're all but invisible to tracking magic. Practically unplotable. Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall have been researching the situation and they believe this new protection is the folder's doing."

"The folder? But why?" Harry asked, wishing he didn't sound quite so lost and bewildered.

"We aren't completely sure. Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall have been studying the matter and formulating theories.

They suspect your folder is acting in this manner because the precautions were... 'set'... when you were incapable of looking after yourself. As far as it is concerned, a guardian is mandatory. Your folder may simply be hiding you until a new guardian can be selected, or..."

"Or?" Harry demanded, not bothering to hide his exasperation as he glanced between the three Hogwarts professors. "What does it mean, Professor?"

Professor Flitwick sighed. "It means, Mr. Potter, that the folder may have already made its choice regarding your guardianship. As I'm sure you recall, your friends the Wrights are having difficulty receiving owls as well. Considering who you've had the most contact with this summer, Tom and Mr. and Mrs. Wright are the most likely candidates for selection. The fact that Tom can still freely receive owls while the Wrights cannot seems to imply they were indeed chosen."

"What?" Whatever Harry had been expecting it hadn't been that! The Wrights as his guardians? No! Impossible! It was far too large a risk for them to take! Besides which, wasn't it his being unceremoniously dumped on their doorstep that made the Dursleys hate him so? Even if the Wrights agreed to this nonsense, how long would it be before they began to resent him?

"We spoke to Tom and Mr. and Mrs. Wright earlier and they seem willing. Of course the folder may simply sense your fondness for the family and is extending the protection on your behalf," Professor Flitwick offered, seeming a little distressed at Harry's reaction. "The folder's decision can be overridden, of course, but doing so would almost certainly destroy the magical protection you're both currently under. The headmaster would like to avoid that if possible. What has accidentally been created here is the strength of the Fidelius without the liability of a Secret Keeper."

Feeling as though his world was unravelling, Harry shook his head, jumping when a wet nose nudged its way under his hand. "...I really don't know what to say," he admitted, sinking both hands into Padfoot's thick fur. "How do we find out?"

“If our suspicions are correct, you simply open the folder and read the first page,” Professor Dumbledore said. “Your folder is sealed,” he continued, demonstrating his own inability to open it before passing it to Harry, “but as owner you should have full access. I merely wanted to prepare you for what you might see.”

Harry nodded, accepting the folder with strangely nerveless fingers. It looked so commonplace, it was hard to believe this was the mysterious "folder" that was causing all the fuss. Swallowing to ease a throat gone suddenly dry, Harry found himself thinking of his trip to Privet Drive. The thought of opening the folder was causing approximately the same level of distress that looking in the living room window had.

In the end he dealt with it in the same manner--do it quickly and get it over with. He sat with one hand on the cover until he couldn't bear the suspense any longer, then flipped the folder open and began to scan the first page.

First was his full name and birthdate...

Harry James Potter b. July 31, 1980.

Then came a list of where he'd lived, when and with whom...

Godric Hollow - James Potter and Lily Potter - 07/31/1980 - 10/31/1981

Hogwarts Hospital Wing - To Be Determined (Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore) - 11/01/1981 - 11/03/1981

Little Whinging -Petunia Dursley (Vernon Dursley) - 11/04/1981 - 07/01/1995

Leaky Cauldron - To Be Determined (Tom Dodderidge) - 07/02/1995 - 07/25/1995

London - Janet Wright (Stephen Wright) primary and Tom Dodderidge secondary - 07/25/1995 -

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry jumped at Dumbledore's gentle prompt, then realized he'd been staring like an idiot. "Janet and Tom," he said, then cleared his throat and tried again. "It says Janet and Tom! And Steve. Janet is primary, Tom is secondary."

"Indeed?" Professor Dumbledore exchanged a look with Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall. "It seems the folder wishes to preserve the status quo."

Taken by surprise, Harry blinked then glanced between the three Hogwarts professors. "Sorry, did you say the folder wants?"

"Your folder was missing," Janet informed him, a knowing sympathy in her dark eyes. "Until you spotted it in the diaper bag a few minutes ago no one could find it. Everyone was just guessing."

Across the room Professor Flitwick nodded. "Fantastic as it may sound, I believe the folder may have achieved a rudimentary intelligence. I don't believe the way it hid or revealed itself was mere coincidence, and it does appear to be looking out for your best interests."

"Oh." Suddenly and ridiculously reminded of Dobby the House Elf, Harry shook his head and battled down a mad urge to laugh. Part of him rankled at the idea of having a guardian at all, seesawing between I don't need a bloody babysitter! and They can't possibly accept! It's too dangerous! Another part didn't mind so much--even allowed that if he had to have a guardian, Steve, Janet, and Tom were loads better than the Dursleys, some random stranger, or one of the stuck-up "pureblood" families. A third part scoffed derisively at the idea Janet, Steve, and Tom would agree to look after the likes of him, and a fourth part, the one crying the loudest, was despairing because he'd never be able to live with his godfather.

All and all he wished he could just go back to bed and start the day over.

"Enough of this, Albus. You can't possibly force him back into the Muggle World. Look at him, he's overwrought!"

What? Harry blinked in surprise as he processed Mrs. Weasley's statement, glancing to his left where Ron's parents were seated.

"Molly, be still," Mr. Weasley hissed. Mrs. Weasley gave him a dirty look before turning and addressing Harry directly.

"Harry, dear, repairs on the Burrow are coming along nicely, and the warding can be modified to include Muggle attacks."

"That is true, Harry." Dumbledore adjusted his half-moon glasses and peered down the length of the table at Harry. "But consider, the Burrow's warding only offers protection while you are in the house or on the property. The folder's protection has no such limitation, and it protects your friends as well."

"Hold on, Professor. No fair laying guilt trips."

When Harry turned to him in surprise, Steve addressed him directly. "Don't accept the folder's decision because you're worried about us, or are afraid of hurting our feelings, Harry. We have lines of retreat available to us, and if things really go stupid we can always return to the States."

Tom nodded his agreement, while Janet smiled reached over and gave his arm a little squeeze. "We'll help any way we can, but you have to think of yourself now, Sweetie. What do you want? What's right for you?"

What do I want? What I can't have, of course. Harry sighed, looking at his godfather with his heart in his eyes. Sirius whined, sounding as miserable as Harry felt and laid his head on Harry's knee. "Me too," Harry said, scratching the big dog's ears before looking at Dumbledore. "Please, sir, I always thought...isn't there any way I could...you know..." Harry stumbled to a stop, not knowing how much was safe to say about Sirius in present company, but his headmaster understood. Harry felt his last hope dissolve as Professor Dumbledore sighed, seeming to age before his eyes.

"I wish it was possible dear boy, but alas, it is not. Although Remus would undoubtedly take you in, current laws prohibit it. I can petition the Board of Governors to allow you shelter at Hogwarts, but that is dependent on their decision, and the protection shares the same limitations as the Burrow."

Harry nodded. "I understand."

"Perhaps you'd like some time to think things over, lad," Tom suggested, clearly trying to ease the tension. "Unless I'm mistaken, the decision doesn't have to be made this instant."

"This isn't just my decision, you know." Harry looked at the Weasleys, then Tom, then Steve and Janet. "You don't have to do this, any of you. In fact, if it means you'll hate me later I wish you wouldn't. What if I screw up?"

He thought he was being perfectly serious, and was a bit annoyed when Janet chuckled. "That's called 'life,' Harry. You're going to screw up, I guarantee it. So will Steve. So will the girls. So will I. Do you think I know the first thing about teen-aged boys?"

"She's right, kid. It's impossible to live with other people without ever stepping on each others' toes. All you can do is apologize, learn, and try to do better in the future."

"But why? Why are you willing to do this?" Harry shook his head and closed his stinging eyes. "Why are you even considering it?" He waited, not sure if anyone would respond--not sure if he wanted anyone to respond--especially when he heard Janet make an exasperated sounding noise beside him.

"What kind of question is that?" Harry opened his eyes in surprise when gentle fingers touched his chin, but complied with the tacit request to turn his head. When Janet saw she had his attention she let go of his chin and took his hand instead. "Because you're my friend, you big goof, and I care about you and I want you safe and protected. I thought that went without saying."

Further down, Tom cleared his throat. When Harry looked him in the eye, the old innkeeper smiled one of his toothless smiles. "The same goes for me, lad. Oh, I admit in the beginning I thought I was extending some harmless charity and wasn't sure how much help you'd really be, but I think your successes speak for themselves. I also meant what I told you the day we met Janet, here. Anyone with sense would be proud to claim you. If certain people are too thick to see what was right before their eyes, that's their lookout, not yours."

Harry shrugged then looked down, unable to hold Tom's gaze. You've only really known me a few weeks. They knew me my whole life. He studied his hands for a minute, then looked up when he heard Mr. Weasley call his name.

Mrs. Weasley's tearful expression caught his attention, but it was Mr. Weasley's steady gaze that truly put Harry on his guard. The last time he'd seen that expression, Mr. Weasley had warned him about the escaped murderer, Sirius Black.

He watched as Mr. Weasley came over to him and squatted by his chair, squirming inside when the older wizard began to speak. "Harry, Molly and I consider you one of our own, and you're always welcome at the Burrow no matter what."

Harry pursed his lips and looked at Mr. Weasley with some trepidation. He had been in enough conversations with Professor Dumbledore to know a qualifier was coming. "But?"

Mr. Weasley sighed and gave him a sad sort of smile. "But, as always, things aren't that easily sorted. Molly, Professor Dumbledore, and I had a chat a bit ago. Circumstances being what they are, and since Tom and Mr. and Mrs. Wright seem to have no objections, I think they might be the best choice for you at this time. Do you understand, Harry?"

Harry nodded stiffly. Until now he'd thought himself immune to rejection. It really was amazing how much more it hurt when it came from someone he considered almost family. The inside of his nose began to sting along with his eyes, and this time he couldn't keep his voice devoid of emotion. "I understand, Mr. Weasley. I'm a threat to

those around me, and too dangerous to have around full time without this new protection."

Mr. Weasley blinked like Harry had struck him, then quickly shook his head. "No, son, that's not it at all. The folder may have the more flexible magic, but the warding on the Burrow is more than adequate. If that was the only issue, I'd invite you to make your choice with a clear conscience." He ran a hand over his thinning red hair, then looked Harry in the eye again. "Forgive me, I started poorly. Let's back up a bit, shall we?" he offered, plunging ahead when Harry shrugged.

"I ran into Percy earlier at the Ministry of Magic. The short version is, we had words a few days ago and apparently his conscience started to bother him. He went to Surrey to check on you, and now the Minister knows an edited version of your circumstances."

Oh, God... Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. This just keeps getting better and better doesn't it? Aloud he asked, "What does that mean? Has he already told the Daily Prophet my aunt and uncle ran off?"

"No, and if we play this right, he won't get a chance to. Minister Fudge isn't clear on all the details. All he knows is your uncle accepted a new position and moved out of the country," Mr. Weasley replied. "He thinks the transfer of your guardianship was simply mismanaged. The bad news is, we believe he plans to appoint a new guardian for you himself."

Harry stiffened, eyes wide and alert. "Can he do that?" he asked, fearing the answer was 'yes'. The parlor grew quiet when Professor Dumbledore replied.

"Child placement has traditionally been a rather simplistic area of Wizard Law, Mr. Potter. The preferred method, even today, is to place the child in question with his or her nearest blood relative. That is, in part, how you came to live with your aunt and uncle fourteen years ago. However, when Grindelwald and later Voldemort rose to power, the Ministry found itself having to place children whose families had been decimated. Some had no living blood relatives to

turn to, so the Curator Tribuo statute was passed. If a Wizard family is willing, Curator Tribuo allows the Minister of Magic to simply transfer the guardianship of an underage minor to the volunteer family, provided the family is able to properly care for the child. The families can come forward of their own accord or they may be approached by the Ministry, but the purpose of the law is to keep magical children in the Wizarding World. The Ministry doesn't sponsor an orphanage, you see, so displaced minors have nowhere to go but Muggle institutions."

Harry digested this in silence while Professor Dumbledore paused to sip his tea. "But sir, my aunt and uncle aren't dead."

Sirius growled deep in his throat, "Not yet, anyway," clear in his tone and body language. Dumbledore sent him a reproofing look before taking up his story again.

"You're quite right of course, dear boy. Technically, Minister Fudge should contact your aunt and uncle and determine what their wishes were concerning you, but according to Mr. Percy Weasley, he may be planning to use the Curator Absentis clause. This clause allows the minister to step in if the guardians are alive but unavailable. Its intent was to cover situations where guardians were alive but not physically or mentally able to care for a dependent. Unfortunately it does not expressly say so, and 'Alive but unavailable' could be made to apply in your case since your relatives are unharmed, but out of the country."

Beside Harry, Mr. Weasley nodded. "Yes, and unless you want to join them in Australia or admit they abandoned you and press charges we'd be fools to contest it."

Press charges? Harry frowned thoughtfully then shuddered, imagining the media circus that would ensue. The Daily Prophet would probably take and change sides with impunity, like it had during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and a trial could potentially drag on for months and dive into issues far beyond the Dursleys running to Australia. "I'd rather not press charges, if it's all the same to you, sir."

Sirius growled again, sounding decidedly sulky, but Dumbledore seemed to sense Harry's desire to take one thing at a time. "As you wish, Mr. Potter," he said, in a tone that did not invite discussion. Harry turned toward Mr. Weasley when he took up his story again.

"Anyway, Harry, as I should have made clear, if I'm reading what Percy told me correctly, the Minister intends to declare you a ward of the Ministry, then prevail upon one or more of the prominent Pureblood families to take over your guardianship. What Professor Dumbledore and I find so worrying is Cornelius Fudge is very close to Lucius Malfoy."

Harry felt his mouth sag open in abject disbelief. "Malfoy?" he croaked when he'd recovered enough to speak. Oh, great. Wonderful. I might as well truss myself up, stuff an apple in my mouth, and present myself to old Voldemort on a silver platter! Mr. Weasley sighed, looking uncomfortable.

"It isn't completely inevitable. You could be assigned to another Pureblood family, but because of our relatively small population child placement cases are taken very seriously. And as much as I hate to say it, it's hard to top the Malfoys on paper. They have wealth, property, good social standing, a son your age..." Mr. Weasley spread his hands, then grimaced, got back to his feet and began to pace.

"We didn't bring this up before, because with your relatives out of the country and your Census Folder gone missing a court battle seemed unavoidable. The only plan we could come up with, and a far more risky plan than we'd like by the way, was to have every Pureblood member of the Order of the Phoenix petition the court in hopes that one of us would be awarded custody. Now, there's another option."

"Yes..." Harry watched as Dumbledore turned and regarded the Wrights, his blue eyes uncharacteristically grave. "We knew you were very likely candidates, based on the mechanics of the enchantments we've observed so far. That and the fact you can't receive owls. We didn't know for certain you'd been selected until just now, but I was hoping having all the parties together might encourage the folder to resurface for signatures. Your acceptance of the its decision is clearly

the best option for Harry under the circumstances. If a guardian is already established, Minister Fudge's options will be more limited. We might even be able to convince him that this was what Mr. Potter's relatives intended and they simply made an error when trying to make their wishes known. The question now is, are you, Mrs. Wright and Tom amenable to the idea?"

Janet glanced at Steve and shrugged after receiving his small nod of permission. "I said I'd be willing to take him in, Professor, even before the issue of protective magic came up. Tom did too, as I recall," she said, glancing at the old innkeeper for confirmation. "I still have concerns, though. Steve and I can handle purely physical dangers, but magic?" She shook her head and lightly touched the folder. "Since that seems to be the number one concern here, I can't understand why it named Steve and me primary guardians instead of a fully trained witch or wizard."

"I think I might have a theory on that," Mr. Weasley ventured, a few seconds later. "The choosing, I mean," he clarified when Harry and the others looked curiously in his direction. He paused a moment, seeming to gather his thoughts. "I think the Wrights may have been chosen because they've only known Harry a few weeks."

"What?" Harry wasn't sure how to take that. Beside him, Janet covered his hand with her own.

"Let's hear what he has to say."

Harry nodded, absently turning his hand so he could grip hers properly--something that never would have occurred to him before. Distantly, he wondered if his brief stay with the Wrights had spoiled him beyond all hope. Steve and Janet had tended his needs in a Muggle and very tactile way which was in direct contrast to the healthcare charms and brisk professionalism Madam Pomfrey favored in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing and his aunt's refusal to deal with him any more than absolutely necessary. After a lifetime of telling himself it didn't matter if his aunt and uncle couldn't bear to be near him, it was a bit off-putting how much little touches suddenly meant.

“My point is, they may have a clearer vision of Harry than others do. They weren’t here when You Know Who’s power was broken and the legend of the Boy Who Lived began, so they see him as the teenaged boy he is--no grand expectations or preconceived notions.”

“Oh I don’t know about that, Mr. Weasley,” Steve put in when the wizard paused. “I have a few expectations and preconceived notions about teenaged boys--having been one once, you understand.” Harry shot Steve a grateful look, appreciating his attempt to bring the tension down a notch. For a second it seemed to work, then Mr. Weasley became all business again.

“I was here in the Leaky Cauldron last Sunday when you and Mrs. Wright brought Harry in and that idiot news team caught sight of him. It reminded me of a similar situation summer of ’92. Harry was grabbed and photographed without so much as a by your leave, and all the witches and wizards present, including Molly and myself, just stood there like it was perfectly acceptable behavior.”

“I think you’re being a little hard on yourself, Mr. Weasley,” Janet, said when Ron’s father looked down in shame. “If your incident happened as quickly and unexpectedly as ours did, you were probably just shocked by their audacity. I know I was. I snapped out of it when it looked like Harry and Becky might fall, but at first...” She trailed off and shrugged, then looked up at Harry. “Does that kind of thing happen every time you go out?” Harry shook his head.

“It happens sometimes, but not as much as you might think. I try to keep an eye out for reporters and I learned to stay back and blend in a long time ago. That’s why this works for the most part,” Harry said, indicating his eyes and headband. “All I am to most people is hair, eyes, and scar.” He jumped a little when Janet squeezed his hand, having forgotten she was still holding it.

“Most people don’t know what they’re missing, Harry, and I’m going to keep telling you that until you believe me. However,” she stopped and looked at her watch. “Since Tom has to reopen soon, I think we need to get back on track here. Knowing that there are still some

particulars we have to work out--like your dog there--what's his name, anyway? I can't keep calling him 'dog.'"

Wait, my dog? Harry wondered, even as he replied, "Snuffles."

"You can't separate a boy and his dog, Jannie," Steve put in. "It's Unconstitutional."

"I can't promise anything yet--I don't even know if our lease allows pets. We'll deal with the details later, but we have to get this guardian matter settled now--right now!"

"Janet?" Harry asked, glancing at Steve to see if the older man had any idea what was going on. Out of nowhere, Janet's tension had ratcheted up about seventeen levels, her breathing had quickened and a light sheen of perspiration had formed on her forehead. "Janet, please! What is it?"

Shaking her head, Janet made a grab for his folder and flipped it open. Two new pieces of parchment were inside: a transfer of guardianship form, by appearances between Petunia Dursley and Janet Wright, and a petition for guardianship made on behalf of Lucius Malfoy by Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic a few days ago. Harry swallowed when he saw "Pending" stamped across the petition. "They're coming here. Now." Swallowing, she looked up at Dumbledore. "How does this work?"

"We will need your signature here," he replied, pointing. "Tom and your husband are ancillary. Only the primary needs to sign."

"You'll need a pen," Steve said, fruitlessly patting at his shirt pockets. "I'll fetch a quill," Tom offered, but Janet stopped him when the folder produced a long, thin, black quill.

"Never mind, Tom. It wants me to use this." Harry's first warning was his headmaster's gasp of shock and shout of warning, but it was too late. Janet was already signing the transfer form. "What is it, Professor?" he asked, interrupting himself with a startled breath when a sudden sharp pain in his hand distracted him. Bloody hell! Harry

thought, watching in horror as letters began appearing in the reddened skin as though cut by a scalpel, then healing over leaving only the redness behind: Janet Marie Anderson Wright...

“What the hell just happened?” Steve demanded. Harry looked up and noticed for the first time that Steve, Janet, and Tom all had the same...injury he did.

“Blood magic,” Professor Dumbledore replied gravely, “and if I’m not mistaken, accidental magic as well.” He flicked his wand at the teapot and was soon pressing a steaming cup of strong, sweet tea into Janet’s shaking hands. “Do you still have the sense of urgency, my dear?”

“Not so much now.” Janet eyed the quill with distaste and put it back in the folder. “They’re still on their way here, but it feels different. We...we should be okay now.” The folder rustled one last time, producing a copy of the transfer form for Janet, before shutting itself and disappearing with a pop. Harry stared at the empty space where it had been in dismay.

“Oh, smashing! Now where’s it gone?”

“Back to the Library, perhaps?” Professor Flitwick speculated hopefully. Mr. Weasley rose from his seat.

“I’ll check. I promised Percy I’d come back in a bit anyway,” he offered, exiting the parlor and heading for the dining room fireplace.

“Excuse, me?” Harry looked up and saw a worried-looking Hermione standing in the parlor doorway. “Minister Fudge and Mr. Malfoy are outside and they want to see Professor Dumbledore,” she announced without preamble. “Mum tried to tell them you were in a meeting, but they’re quite insistent, especially since the Leaky Cauldron is due to reopen soon.”

“Tell him we have ten more minutes, and we need them to wrap up,” Steve said, checking his watch. “Harry, run up to your room, ditch the

headband and contacts, then join the other kids in the dining room. Quick now. We have to make this look natural.”

Harry made quick work of shedding his disguise and was back in the dining room well before his ten minute time limit.

Unfortunately it looked like the minister and Mr. Malfoy hadn’t wanted to wait. “What is the meaning of this?” the minister was demanding. “I had this petition for guardianship drawn up just a few days ago! How could it be invalid?”

Bother, Harry thought as he made his way over to his friends’ table and slipped into a chair between Ron and Hermione. I hate it when the conversation’s already started. He did a quick inventory, then frowned. Sirius and the Wrights were nowhere in sight.

“Professor Dumbledore asked Snuffles and the Wrights to wait in the parlor,” Hermione whispered. “Oh, and Mr. Wright came out while you were changing,” she said, slipping him a folded piece of paper.

Curious, Harry unfolded it and discovered a hastily scribbled note.

The headmaster is supposed to do all the talking but if you are approached:

You are visiting your friends, we are at home.

Your uncle knows Janet through work. He knows she accepted a transfer and vice versa.

They arranged to transfer your guardianship to us, but communicated through e-mail and Muggle post because your aunt won’t use owls.

We were supposed to arrive before they left, but things fell apart when your uncle’s timetable was moved up. We just managed to get back in touch.

Your aunt just told us to contact Professor Dumbledore for help getting things straightened out.

If the failsafe comes up, it was triggered by the paperwork delay.

“It was a simple misunderstanding, Cornelius,” Professor Dumbledore said in his most reasonable voice. “Unfortunately, Mr. Potter’s aunt and uncle are uncomfortable with Owl Post and international Muggle post is notoriously slow. At first glance it appeared that they had simply left the boy behind, but I have a copy of the notarized transfer form right here. I’m sure Mr. Potter appreciates your interest in his welfare as much as I do, but his aunt’s wishes are quite clear. I must have forgotten to sign the check out log in my eagerness to correct the mistake, but all the necessary papers have been filed, and Mr. Potters folder is back in the Archive where it belongs.”

“It’s high time Potter took his place in Wizard society,” Fudge objected, shaking his head. “Sending him back to the Muggle world will not help him do that. Lucius could groom him, like he does his own son. In this case, though it pains me, I might have to override the transfer.”

“Alas, the aunt insisted on the use of a Blood Quill,” Dumbledore said, indicating Janet’s signature. “The transfer is quite unbreakable.”

If Harry hadn’t been looking directly at Mr. Malfoy when it happened, he might have missed the flash of loathing in his eyes before he resumed his usual bland superiority. “Well, that’s that, I suppose, Cornelius. I’m only too happy to help and if you need me in the future you need only ask, but it looks like we’re wasting time here.” With that, he swept out the doorway leading into Diagon Alley. Minister Fudge stayed only a few seconds longer before following suit. Harry sat very still after the bells stopped jingling and released the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

It was only then the enormity of the situation hit him. Yes, he’d dodged having Malfoy as a guardian, but in the process he’d managed to make his new friends targets. On top of that, he was probably looking at a whole new relationship dynamic. Harry knotted his fingers in his lap and hoped he’d done the right thing.

“All right there, Harry?” Ron asked. Harry nodded, aware that his two best friends were looking at him very seriously.

“I’m okay. A little knackered maybe, but nothing bad.” He paused to smile at both of them, then the table at large. “I’ve missed you this summer, and I have loads to tell you,” he said, then turned to smile at Hermione. “I’ll even share what I learned about child minding if you like.”

“Oh, now there’s a stimulating topic,” Fred said, elbowing George. “I think I’d like to hear that one.”

“It’s not for the faint of heart,” Harry informed them. “I found myself wondering how your mum ever managed with you lot. Hey!” he greeted when Janet walked over.

“Hey, Sweetie. We’re going back to the house. I need to give Becky the last of her medicine, and I know you want to catch up with your friends. Professor Dumbledore said we’d reconvene tomorrow same time, same place to get the details finalized.” She paused, and gave him a quick once over. “You look tired.”

Harry shrugged. “I am a bit.”

“Well, don’t overdo it. Tom’s here and I’m right down the street if you need anything. Oh, hey!” She looked at her watch. “Cool! It’s late enough,” she said, opening the purse hanging from her shoulder and rummaging briefly until she found her cell phone.

Harry frowned. “Late enough?” he asked, as Steve and Kitty ambled over, pushing a still drowsing Becky in her stroller.

“Yeah. Once we’re outside and I can get a signal I want to call my mom,” Janet explained, turning a teasing grin on Harry. “Have to tell her about the new baby, don’t I? Don’t worry, I’ll keep it short,” she said when Steve crossed his arms and gave her a mock-severe look.

“You better. You know I’ll have to call my mom, too.”

“Oh, you’re just mad ‘cause you didn’t think of it first,” Janet replied with an airy wave of dismissal.

“Yeah, well, luckily we’re in England so they won’t be able to kill us. Next visit all bets are off.”

“Oh! Professor!” Harry looked and saw his headmaster had come up behind her. “Is there something wrong?” she asked, noting his troubled expression.

“Perhaps you should consider keeping your new guardianship close, Mrs. Wright.”

Janet frowned in confusion. “Close? What are you saying? You want me to not tell my family and friends?”

Dumbledore looked a little pained, but nodded. “It might be the wiser course, I am sad to say.”

“It might be easier, you mean?” Janet smiled and shook her head. “You’re probably right, Professor, but that’s not the way it works. No one forced me to invite Harry into my life. If it will ease your mind I’ll postpone my call, and we can discuss what’s safe to reveal to whom when we meet tomorrow, but I’m not going to treat him as an outsider or pretend he doesn’t exist. It’s not fair to him or to us.”

Harry watched in shock as his headmaster nodded solemnly, then gave her a rather sheepish smile. “Forgive me. It is sometimes...difficult...to see what is right and what is easy. You are right of course, and I shall depend on your good judgement.”

“Thank you, Professor. We’ll see you tomorrow, and don’t worry. Things will work out. Harry will just have to be patient with us, that’s all,” she said with a grin, turning to give the now thoroughly gobsmacked Harry a hug. “Bye sweetie. We’ll see you later or in the morning. Bye, kids.”

"Sweetie?" Ron asked, once all the Wrights said their goodbyes and had vanished through the London door.

Harry sighed. Oh, boy, here it comes, he thought, waiting for Ron and his brothers to take the mickey, but Ron surprised him.

"Blimey, Harry, it's almost like you have a proper mother now." Across the table the twins nodded solemnly.

"You're going to have to toe the line now, mate," George informed him.

Fred nodded gravely. "No more fun for you...unless you want to take the consequences of course."

George hummed in agreement. "I don't know if I'd chance it, though." Fred, nodded, then broke into a big grin as Harry picked up his pumpkin juice.

"Yeah, she could do some damage with that bag of hers," he teased, making Harry choke on the juice, and sending the table into hysterics.

"Better have a care mate," Ron said, as he pounded Harry on the back. "'Course it's not all bad. Mums can be dead useful. Dad's too. Little sisters on the other hand...rotten luck there--Oi!" he yelped when Ginny and Hermione shoved him in the shoulders.

"Serves you right, Ronald," Hermione said, exchanging a smile with Ginny. "Don't listen to them Harry. Like Mrs. Wright said, things will work out."

"Yeah," Harry acknowledged, actually beginning to believe it. "I think you may be right, Hermione."

Chapter 36